

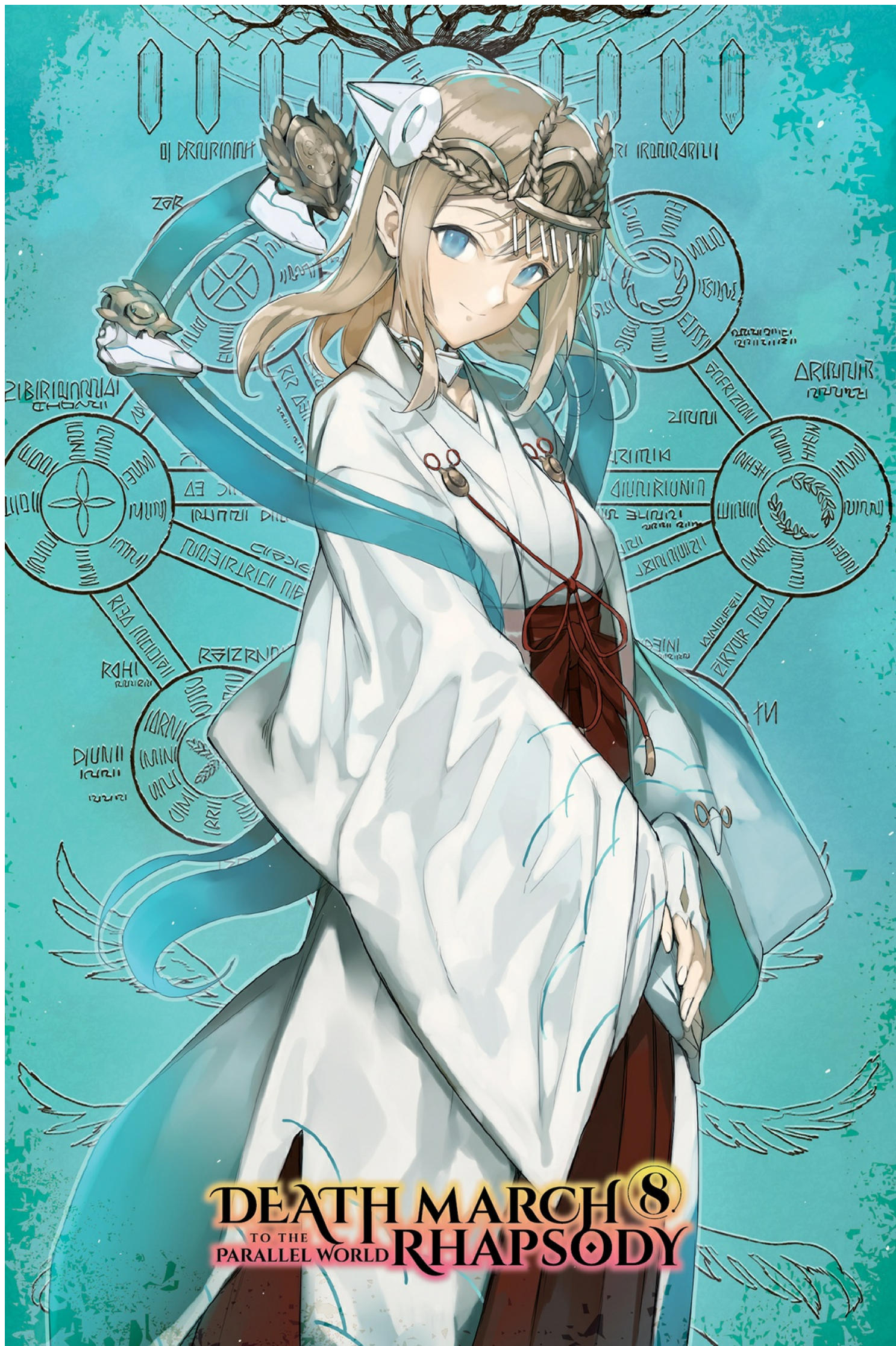


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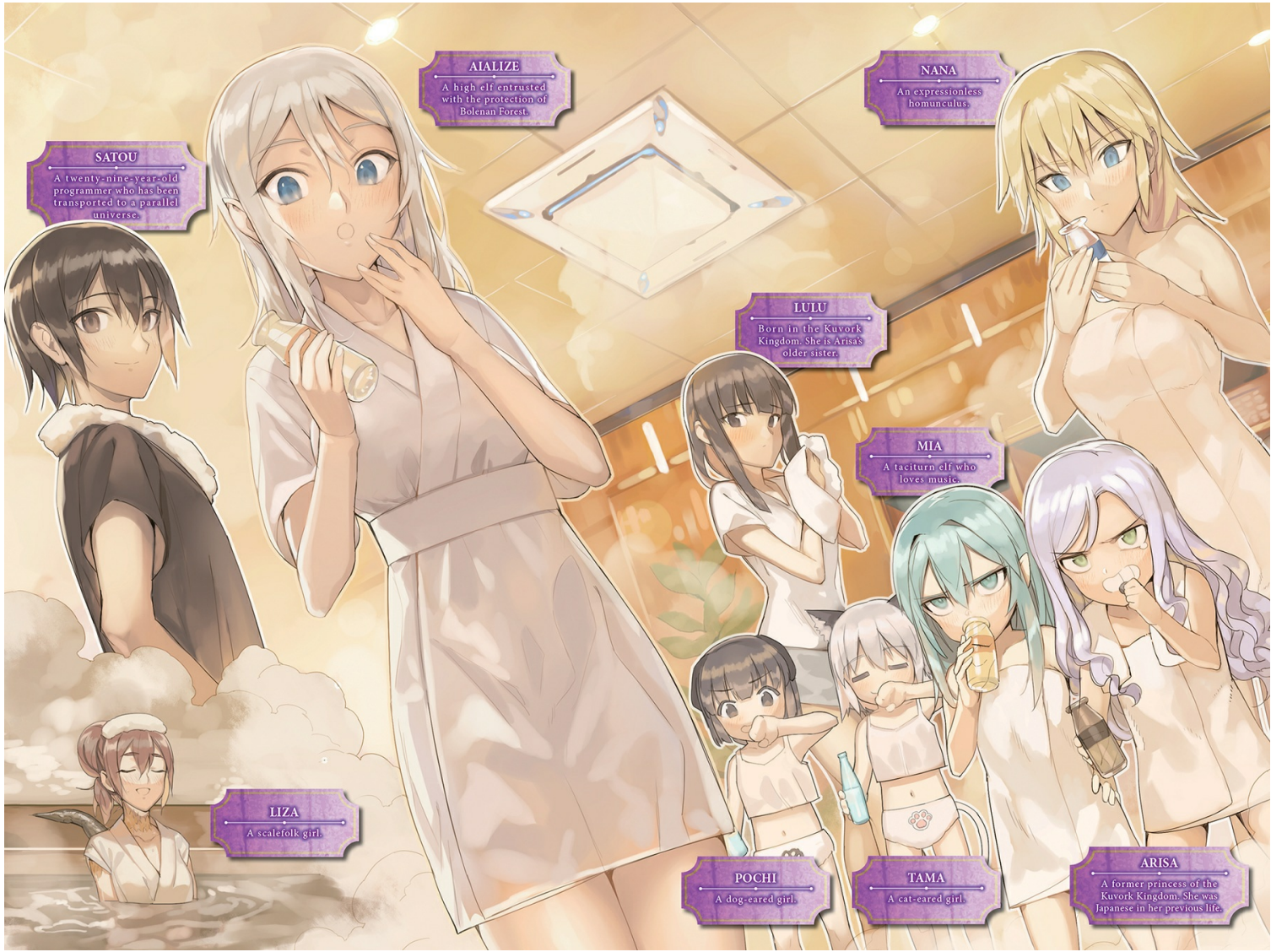
DEATH MARCH 8. TO THE PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody

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DEATH MARCH 8
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody



SATOU

A twenty-nine-year-old programmer who has been transported to a parallel universe.

AIALIZE

A high elf entrusted with the protection of Bolenan Forest.

NANA

An expressionless homunculus.

LULU

Born in the Kuvork Kingdom. She is Arisa's older sister.

MIA

A taciturn elf who loves music.

LIZA

A scalefolk girl.

POCHI

A dog-eared girl.

TAMA

A cat-eared girl.

ARISA

A former princess of the Kuvork Kingdom. She was Japanese in her previous life.

“Beautiful,
isn’t it?”

Aialize
smiled like
a mother
looking
at her
beloved
child.



DEATH MARCH
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody

8

★ ★ ★
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NEW YORK

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 8

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by shri

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The Secret of Bolenan

Satou here. I like to relax after I've finished a job, but that's always when some new problem rears its ugly head. In fact, I get even more nervous when I don't receive any feedback, because it makes me think I must've missed a huge bug...

"Satou."

Mia called out to me from across the crowd of elves.

We had just entered the Bolenan Forest, a huge forest in the southeast of the Shiga Kingdom.

After we left behind the old capital and our new friends, the hero and his party, we got caught up in a bit of intrigue in a town called Puta and ended up rescuing the white tigerfolk princess.

Somewhere along the way, I made friends with the black dragon Hei Long, who helped us cross a treacherous mountain range to arrive at the Bolenan Forest, Mia's home.

When we reached a clearing there, tons of elves and fairies came out to greet us, including Mia's parents.

As I was reflecting on these recent events, Mia came running up to me, pulling along an elf boy and girl who didn't look any older than your average middle schooler.

Her pale-aqua-blue pigtails danced around her slightly pointed ears as she ran.

"Parents."

They looked only a year or two older than Mia, but the difference was actually centuries.

Unsurprisingly, their daughter was the spitting image. From what I could tell,

all elves seemed to have hair in shades of blue or green.

They were wearing what seemed to be the traditional clothing of elves: an emerald-green tunic with a leaf design and a green tricornered hat. Their shoes were made of brown cloth.

Overall, they looked like fairies straight out of a children's book.

"I am Misanaria's father, Lamisauya, son of Uramufuya and Laleilea. Satou of the Shiga Kingdom, I thank thee."

"I am Misanaria's mother, Lilinatoa, daughter of Trazayuya and Selinaria."

...Trazayuya?

So Mia's mother was the daughter of Trazayuya, the elf who made the Cradle?

I had better return his journals later, then.

"Satou of the Shiga Kingdom, I am in your debt."

After their words of gratitude, the pair touched their palms to their foreheads and then their chests in some kind of salute, probably an Elvish gesture of thanks.

"It is my pleasure to return Miss Misanaria to your—"

"Mrrr. Mia."

Mia grouchily interrupted as I was replying to her parents.

I was just trying to be polite, but clearly she didn't like it.

Once I corrected myself, Mia introduced the rest of our group to her parents.

"Liza. Spear master."

Beneath her crimson hair, Liza of the orangescale tribe blushed at Mia's epithet.

Her orange scale-covered tail flicked back and forth, revealing her pride.

"Tama. Cute."

The cat-eared, cat-tailed Tama giggled and then covered her face with her pink hood, hiding her white hair.

So even the laid-back Tama got embarrassed when someone complimented her.

“Pochi. Happy.”

With her brown bob haircut and dog ears, Pochi struck a triumphant pose.

Her canine tail was wagging excitedly.

“Nana. Big.”

Mia patted her own flat chest as she said this.

Her golden hair tied back in a ponytail, Nana was expressionless as ever as she pushed her ample breasts together with both hands.

Mia’s father let out a little “ooh” of admiration, prompting her mother to smack the back of his head. *So he likes ’em big, too? We’ll get along just fine.*

Incidentally, while Nana might look like a human adult, she was actually a homunculus and less than a year old, so there was no seduction intended in her playful movements.

“Arisa. Wow.”

“Wow?” Arisa repeated, doubt rising in her large eyes. Her purple hair, considered an ill omen by most, was covered by a blond wig.

She was probably trying to figure out whether “wow” referred to the fact that she researched magic with Mia or to the strange cultural things she tended to do and say as a reincarnated Japanese person.

“Lulu. Good cook.”

Lulu, with her dark eyes and Japanese features, bowed gracefully.

Her long, glossy black hair swayed smoothly, making her look all the more alluring.

Being in her early teens, she was far too young to be a romantic interest for me, but I couldn’t help admiring her loveliness.

Unfortunately, she was considered homely by the standards of most humans in this world, but it didn’t seem like the elves had a particular sense of beauty or ugliness. Good on them.

“Satou. Pretty.”

Wait, what?

That would be a valid assessment of Lulu, but me, on the other hand... No one in this world but Arisa had ever complimented my looks.

I hadn't been treated like I was ugly or anything, but since being reborn from my twenty-nine-year-old body to this fifteen-year-old one, I still had the kind of face that just blended into a crowd.

Mia's parents and the other nearby elves seemed to agree with my self-evaluation, as they simply looked at me in puzzlement. But then...

“Pretty!”

“Yes, very pretty.”

“I agree!”

The silver-eyed fairies sitting on Mia's head and shoulders all chorused in agreement.

Mia's mother's eyes changed from blue-green to silver as she looked at me again.

“You're right—it's true! Pretty, very pretty indeed! What a marvelous variety of spirits, and so many, too! It's hard to see, but the rainbow-colored spirit light is beautiful. I've never seen anything like it!”

Mia's mother sounded exactly like her daughter whenever she got excited or (on one occasion) drunk.

“Clearly he is beloved by spirits.”

“I have never seen such a gathering of spirits outside a mana source or underground vein.”

“How unusual. Why, it is almost as if Lady Aaze is here.”

Everyone who thus gathered around to proclaim my beauty had the skill “Spirit Vision.”

According to them, these so-called spirits were flocking around me like moths to a flame, making an aura called a “spirit light” that fairies were quite fond of.

It sounded like it was quite a sight to behold.

Mia explained later that the reason she was able to find me no matter where I went was because she followed the souls of the spirits gathering around me.

That explained why she had asked if I was a “spiritualist” when we first met.

Using a fairy ring located in the clearing where the elves had met us, we followed Mia’s parents to their home.

This seemed to be a common method of travel in the elf village and fortunately didn’t require kissing any dryads.

According to my map, this forest was so large that it was four or five times the size of the vast Ougoch Duchy, but with teleportation, it was possible to travel from the outer edge of the forest to the center in an instant.

We found ourselves on a small hill in the middle of the forest, where we could see the mountain-like roots of the World Tree and the forest of Mountain-Trees growing around it.

It was amazing. Almost too much, really.

I looked up in awe at the overwhelmingly huge World Tree.

Clouds clung to its branches like snow.

High above the clouds, it spread out into more branches and leaves, but above that, its thick trunk alone extended beyond where the eye could see.

The Mountain-Trees, which were indeed the size of mountains, looked like ordinary shrubbery compared to the World Tree.

Honestly, the scale was so insane that I almost doubted my eyes.

“Satou.”

As I stared dumbstruck at the World Tree, Mia tugged on my hand, leading me down the hill.

“Treetop Village.”

Her slender finger pointed at a plaza built around a fountain. The elves’ houses were in the giant trees that surrounded it.

The mushroom-like formations growing out of the trunks formed the roofs of the houses and were connected to one another with something like suspension bridges. The AR display simply labeled them as **tree houses**.

Perfect. Now, that was a fantasy town if I'd ever seen one.

“““Mia!””” a chorus of voices cried. “““Welcome home!”””

Turning toward the source of the voices, I saw elves crowding at the windows of the tree houses and on the suspension bridges, waving excitedly at Mia. Some were even celebrating her return by singing or playing music.

Checking the map, I saw that there was another elf residential district in a semi-underground area near the roots of the World Tree.

I wasn't sure what the difference was between the neighborhoods, so I decided to find out during our stay.

“<Stairs.>”

Mia's father said the word in Elvish from atop a stone platform near the hill, and glowing sheets of light began to form floating stairs in the air.

“Sparklyyy?”

“The light turned into stairs, sir!”

Tama and Pochi looked at me, obviously eager to go racing up the stairs.

I would've liked to give them permission, but since there weren't any railings, I had them hold hands with me so that we could walk up together instead.

When we placed our feet on the first step, it emitted a lilting note like a piano.

So the stairs themselves were instruments, too. It reminded me of the nightingale floors I saw on a Kyoto trip.

“Wow, what a fun staircase,” Arisa remarked.

Lulu nodded in agreement. “It's very much what you'd expect from Mia's hometown, isn't it?”

Eventually, the stairway stopped at a tree house, and from there we transferred to a staircase of wood and ivy carved around the trunk.

“M-master, please be careful! The stairs move!”

Much to Liza’s alarm, the stairs began to move like an escalator.

“A wooden escalator, huh? That’s pretty avant-garde.”

Arisa looked unfazed, but the rest of the children tiptoed gingerly up the stairs.

I tried to help them along as I looked around the trees.

Aside from branches that were large enough to rival the Mountain-Trees, there were also short branches only a few feet long, from which various kinds of fruit were growing in jumbled bunches.

“Master, I have located fruits of the same varieties found in the Cradle, I report.”

Nana pointed to a branch that boasted pears and grapes.

Thinking back, I remembered that the Cradle of Trazayuya, where I rescued Mia, also had similar branches that bore multiple kinds of fruit.

“Looks yummyyy?”

“They smell good, sir.”

“Correct. Choose.”

Mia’s father nodded at Tama and Pochi, allowing them to take the fruits of their choosing.

His instructions were brief, to say the least, but the pair seemed to understand just fine.

Tama and Pochi grabbed some fruits, then looked back at me. They were probably waiting for permission, so I nodded to them, and they happily dug in.

“Deliicious?”

“So crunchy, sir.”

Tama had chosen grapes, while Pochi chose a pear.

“*Mikan.*”

Mia pulled a few mandarin oranges off another branch and handed them to

Arisa and Lulu.

“Mm, that’s the stuff!”



“So this is the legendary *mikan*, the fruit best eaten while sitting under a *kotatsu*. How wonderful!”

Lulu seemed exaggeratedly impressed, while Arisa simply peeled the little orange open and shoved as much of it into her mouth as humanly possible, chewing away in satisfaction.

“This grape has a very fine texture.”

“Agreed. It is delicious, I report.”

Liza and Nana, too, accepted some large grapes from Mia’s mother and ate them with pleasure.

I guess they’re all getting hungry, huh?

When we arrived at the veranda of a tree house, it looked like some of the girls might be too scared to get off the escalator, so I dealt with the situation by helping them down myself.

“I apologize for causing you such trouble, master.”

“Don’t worry about it, Liza.”

Liza looked ashamed, so I smiled reassuringly at her before Mia took my hand and led me inside.

The interior was large, much larger than I’d expected from the outside.

Grass covered the floor like it was an indoor lawn, and flowers bloomed from the ivy that crept around the walls and ceiling, bearing citrus fruits that produced a refreshing fragrance.

The grass was as soft as a luxurious carpet.

“<Mia!>”

“<Welcome home, Mia!>”

More elves who hadn’t been in the clearing before showed up to celebrate Mia’s return.

Sending silent waves of encouragement to Mia as she was jostled around by the crowd, I headed toward the center of the room with Mia’s parents and the

rest of my group.

“<Table.>”

Mia’s father murmured in Elvish in the center of the room, and a tree stump–like table emerged from the lawn.

Next, Mia’s mother said, “<Chairs>,” and ivy sprouted from among the grass and formed seats.

Mia’s father snapped his fingers, and fairies brought enough goblets to the table for everyone.

Belatedly, I noticed there were two different kinds of fairies: Some had dragonfly wings, while others had butterfly wings.

When Mia’s father snapped again, growths that looked like pitcher plants lowered from the ceiling and poured a transparent, sweet-smelling liquid into the goblets.

It looked delicious, but it was definitely the sap of the pitcher plants.

Is that safe to drink?

“Yummyyy?”

“It’s tasty, sir.”

Unlike me, however, Tama and Pochi were already drinking the liquid and giving it rave reviews. *That’s good, I guess.*

While we were distracted by the fantasy scene unfolding before our eyes, it seemed we had neglected to stay alert for certain suspicious characters.

Only when I heard small voices of protest did I realize the danger.

“Leggo!”

“Hey, let go of me!”

“Help! Laya, help us!”

Turning, I saw that Nana had captured three of the winged fairies, who were tearfully crying out for help from Mia’s father.

One was held in each of Nana’s hands; the third, most inexcusably of all, was

trapped between her breasts.

Trade places with me.

Mia's father, too, was just staring at the fairy flailing about in Nana's cleavage, making no attempt to help.

Eventually, his eyes met mine, and we exchanged a nod.

...Ow.

Arisa smacked my head from behind. Lulu had stepped in to rescue the fairies.

"What are you, pervs from Planet Cleavage?"

"You've got it all wrong."

"Mm. Wrong."

I turned away from the accusing eyes of Arisa and Lulu and sought out Mia, who was still being crushed by a well-meaning crowd.

Just as I'd imagined, most of the elves were quite slender. There wasn't a chubby one to be found, nor were any of them particularly well-endowed in the chest department.

"<Geez, what a racket.>"

"<That girl oughtta learn some manners.>"

"<This one is comfy, though.>"

For some reason, the fairies who'd fled from Nana now gathered on my head and shoulders. One particularly peevish one was pulling on my hair.

It was actually a little painful, so I gently plucked that one from my head and lowered it to the table.

The fairies grumbled at that, until Pochi broke a pastry into pieces and fed it to each of them.

"<Oh! Now, that's tasty!>"

"<You ain't kiddin'.>"

"<More pleeease!>"

Powdered sugar was flying everywhere in the process, so I decided to clean up with Everyday Magic later.

Evidently hearing the pleased exclamations of their fellows, more winged fairies started gathering around with demands.

“<Hey, gimme some, too, huh?>”

“<Isn’t there any for me?>”

“Owie, please wait, sirs. I don’t have any more.”

The fairies were speaking in the Elvish language, so Pochi shouldn’t have been able to understand them, but somehow they seemed to be holding a conversation.

It was cute to watch Pochi get flustered at the fairies, but I decided I’d better throw her a lifeline.

I took a basket full of pastries out of Storage by way of the Garage Bag and put it on the table.

“Here you go.”

As soon as the basket touched the table, the winged fairies flocked to attack it.

Yikes.

Some of them got a little overzealous and disappeared so far into the mountain of sweets that only their feet were left sticking out, while others were flung to the other side of the table, clinging to their own pastries.

The elves who came over with Mia seemed interested in the baked goods as well, so I put another basket of them out on the table.

“Tasty.”

“Mm.”

“Good.”

Most of them gave this kind of single-word comment that I was used to from Mia, though a few went on longer tangents like her mother. Unfortunately, most elves seemed to favor the former.

“My, that’s delicious. They’re really quite tasty. Say, did you make these, Mr. Satou? Did you really?”

“They’re so good! I could eat a dozen of them.”

“Hee-hee, me too. Is this sweetness honey? Or perhaps snow sugar?”

I was beginning to build up something of a fan club, but not all the elves were quite so friendly toward me.

One elf boy in particular charged right up to me, prodding me in the chest.

“Lovers?”

Uh, come again?

I stared at him in bewilderment until Mia made a show of clinging to my side.

“Duh!” she exclaimed, despite all evidence to the contrary.

As it turned out, the boy harbored a crush of his own on Mia.

Well, I was calling him a “boy,” but he looked the same age as Mia’s father and was in fact two hundred years old, making him older than Mia.

“Why?”

“Pretty, nice, strong, fun...”

Mia’s response to the boy’s question went on for quite some time.

“...Satou rescued me from an evil magician. He saved me! It was amazing! I’m so proud! Even Red Helmet and Yuya couldn’t do that. It’s true!”

“Agreed. Master carried me out of the Cradle when it collapsed, I report.”

Nana boastfully added her own supplement to Mia’s extensive case.

Red Helmet was a ratfolk warrior who helped Mia during the Cradle incident, while “Yuya”—Yusaratoya—was an elf who owned a general store in Seiryuu City.

Nana was probably referring to after I defeated the Undead King Zen in the Cradle, when I helped her and her sisters escape as it self-destructed and turned into salt.

Unable to compete with Mia’s overwhelming declarations, the boy simply fled

with a parting cry of “Won’t lose!”

“I am sorry, Mr. Satou. Do forgive him. Mia is almost like a younger sister to Goya. They grew up together, you see.”

Since all the elves looked so similar, I had already forgotten what Goya’s face looked like.

His name, on the other hand, would probably stick in my mind, since it strongly reminded me of the Japanese word for bitter melon.

“Goya is a good boy; he really is, you know? He’s a little too attached to Mia, that’s all. A bit overprotective, understand?”

I later learned that Goya had taken Mia’s fiancé claim seriously and had come to put a stop to it.

I would have to resolve that little misunderstanding before I left.

“This bread looks like the shell of a cream puff; it’s delicious.”

“It’s sort of like a Yorkshire pudding I had in a British restaurant once.”

The snack time had evolved into a full-on banquet, so my companions and I went around tasting all the delicious food the elves had to offer.

Piled up on the huge tree-stump table was a mountain of something like freshly baked Yorkshire puddings, surrounded by roast beef, meat pies, sausages, fish marinade, whole-roasted birds, and more.

In addition to the meat dishes, there were also berry pie, cherry pie, platters full of salad and cut fruit, and even a tower of jelly.

All of it was provided by the elves to celebrate Mia’s return.

Brownies, the short-statured house fairies, flitted about among the elves, endlessly arranging more food.

...Hmm? How odd. Something felt out of place, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

“So chewyyy.”

“You can use it to pick up the roast beef, sir.”

“Master, please do try it with this teriyaki chicken, as well.”

The beastfolk girls showed me how to use the pseudo–Yorkshire puddings to scoop up meat, so I tried each of them in turn.

“Master, this pie is delicious, I report.”

Powdered sugar from the pie was collecting in Nana’s cleavage, so I tied a napkin around her neck to match Pochi’s and Tama’s bibs.

A sigh of disappointment arose from a group of elves who’d been admiring her chest.

“Welcome home, Mia! We brought sweet melons, your favorite.”

“You still haven’t put on any weight, eh?”

“We downed some ducks and deer during the hunt, so make sure you eat a bit of each.”

A group of high-level elves peered in through the entrance, bows still in hand as they showed off their prey.

Oh, that’s it! It was the meat that seemed out of place.

I had thought elves didn’t eat meat, but here they were presenting all kinds of artisanal meat-based dishes and eating away without a care in the world.

They weren’t as completely meat-obsessed as the beastfolk girls, but there wasn’t a vegetarian among the bunch.

Well, except for one.

“Oh, Mia! How will you ever grow up if you stay such a picky eater? You won’t, you know! Here, eat some meat; don’t be shy, now. Eat up, will you?”

“Mrrr. Uh-uh.”

“Eat.”

Mia was trapped between her parents, both of whom were pressing her to eat meat.

I guess I was wrong to think they were all vegetarians, then.

In retrospect, when I first offered Mia meat, she simply mumbled things like

“elf” and “meat” and formed an X in front of her mouth. I assumed that meant “elves don’t eat meat,” but I guess it was actually “Mia the elf doesn’t like meat.”

Arisa had even said, *Oh, so elves don’t eat meat?* and Mia hadn’t corrected her.

So all this time, she was just being picky?

If it wasn’t a lifestyle choice or an allergy, then I should probably get her to start eating it.

She seemed to enjoy the tofu hamburg steak, so maybe that would make a good starting point.

“Wait.”

“No problem,” I answered Mia’s father.

“Mrrr. Tenth time.” Mia, who was watching from the side, glowered up at him.

Some elves had brought out a shogi board during the feast, and for some reason, I was now on a string of consecutive victories.

This was probably a combination of my high INT skill, which allowed me to clearly visualize possibilities for the next dozen moves, and my experience making a shogi app game, during which I learned most of the classic strategies for reference’s sake.

I guess the training hell I underwent at the hands of Mr. Tubs, the head planner for the shogi game, was still seared into my brain, too. He was a force to be reckoned with, having gone to national tournaments in his youth.

It was to the point where it felt a bit like cheating, so I was happy to acquiesce to any requests for extra time.

“Mr. Satou, would you like some fairy wine?”

“I’d love some. Thank you.”

I accepted the goblet of wine from Mia’s mother, savoring the beautiful ruby-red liquid with my eyes and nose before I brought it to my lips.

The wine had a very light body, but it was more delicious than any I'd ever tasted. The mild, mysterious flavor sank into my tongue.

Instead of assaulting the nostrils like strong liquor might, it had a gentle fragrance that roused the senses.

It wasn't quite as intense an experience as dragonspring liquor, but it was still fantastic.

The cheeses, pies, and other delicacies the elves presented with it were good, but I thought it might make a good pairing with the Lessau County cheese I got in the old capital.

"My, what an excellent cheese!"

"It goes wonderfully with the wine."

My intuition was right, earning praise from the elves.

"Done... Urgh."

Once Mia's father made his move after lengthy contemplation, I moved my next piece without a second thought.

"Master! This dish is incredible!"

"Master, this fluffy white substance is delicious, I report."

Lulu was holding something like tofu cooked in miso, while Nana appeared to have located marshmallows. Both of them ran up and shoved a forkful into my mouth, then ran off to find their next dish.

Well, at least they were enjoying the party.

It was nice of them to feed me some and all, but I wished they'd be a little gentler.

"Is it true that you've eaten hamburg steak before?!"

Beyond the crowd of elves, I heard a cry from where the beastfolk girls were battling over the meat dishes.

"Of cooourse?"

"We sure have, sir! I can eat a hundred, sir!"

Tama and Pochi posed victoriously for the crowd of excited elf girls.

Liza was busy munching on a different meat entrée, so she simply nodded vigorously. The roasted drumsticks seemed to be her favorite.

Just because it's delicious doesn't mean you should eat it bone and all, though, Liza.

"Sir Satou! You know how to make hamburg steak, then?!"

"I do indeed."

The girl who'd led the charge over to me clapped her hands together in delight and then pressed forward. "Please, won't you teach me?"

I nodded, and she flung her arms around my neck, pressing her cheek to mine with delight.

"Would that mean you can make things like omelet rice and pizza, too?"

"Y-yes, I'd be happy to make those for you sometime."

The second girl swooned at my response.

Then a third one pressed forward, full of anticipation.

"What about...c-c-curry rice?"

"Sorry, I—"

"O-of course, I should have known. Even Daisaku the Hero, who taught us the cooking of Nihon, said curry was too difficult to reproduce..."

Her shoulders slumped with disappointment, so I finished what I'd been starting to say.

"—I don't have all the necessary herbs and spices on hand, but I do know the recipe."

The elf girl raised her face with renewed hope.

"If you'd like, would you mind helping me collect the spices?"

"Yes, I'd be thrilled!"

The girl nodded eagerly, and I smiled in response.

Sweet. Always good to have help with that kind of thing.

The spice-based curry recipe was in one of the notepads I'd acquired at the black-market auction in Muraas.

There was other useful information in there as well, but my top priorities were the recipes for curry and chocolate. Oh, and ramen, too.

I promised the Elvish chefs I would exchange recipes with them, and soon we were having a lively discussion about cooking. Even Lulu joined in.

My game against Mia's father was over in about an hour, and I declined the next match, citing my exhaustion from recent travels.

As night fell, I went out to the veranda and looked around at the elf village.

The sounds of laughter and music filled the air, suggesting that there were parties going on in other tree houses, too.

A large group seemed to be celebrating around a bonfire in the clearing below.

"Satou."

"What's wrong, Mia? Should the guest of honor really be leaving her seat?"

"Mm."

Mia tugged on my hand and led me away from the tree house, passing by the party in the plaza.

"How far are we going, exactly?"

"Almost."

As I followed Mia, I gazed around at the homes of the elves, so smoothly integrated with nature.

After we went down a mossy wooden staircase, we arrived in a clearing where colorful mushrooms grew in neat circles. These were fairy rings, the same transportation devices we'd used to get from the entrance of the forest to this residential area.

"Here."

I followed Mia into one of the fairy rings.

“Teleport.”

At Mia’s command, the fairy ring shimmered and flashed.

I wasn’t sure where we were going, but knowing Mia, she wouldn’t take us anywhere dangerous.

The speed of the flashes increased, and the light emanating from the ground grew brighter. Then, once the flashing ended, we were teleported away.

An instant later, we were standing atop an open hill overlooking a town in a different part of the forest.

This town bore little resemblance to the tree houses that were built in harmony with nature. Smooth roads led up to the hill at even intervals, lined by perfectly spaced one-story houses.

It was systematically designed and constructed, almost reminiscent of a modern Japanese town or even city.

If the place we just came from was the home of the elves, then what in the world was this?

I let my eyes wander as I contemplated this puzzle.

Above us was a transparent canopy, supported by what seemed to be tree branches. It was large enough to cover the entire town.

No, those weren’t branches. They were the roots of the World Tree.

Feeling a tug on my sleeve, I looked down to see Mia, whose eyes held a mischievous glint.

“Real town,” she explained simply.

...“Real”?

Is the town up in the trees a fake, then?

Still confused, I opened my map to check our current position.

This seemed to be the other elf residence that I’d noticed on the map earlier.

“Do the elves normally live here, then?”

Mia's only response was another "Mm."

Still holding my hand, Mia led me to a nearby spot that appeared to be a tram platform.

Near it were some objects that looked like the Floating Boards produced by Practical Magic.

The boards were transparent, but they did have color, so this spell must not be the one I was familiar with.

Shortly after we reached the platform, a young boy arrived on another board.

He seemed young—that is, except that he was sporting a beard that didn't suit his face at all.

It gave me painful flashbacks to when I'd tried to grow a beard myself.

...It's all right. Not everyone looks good with a beard.

"Welcome home, Mia. You brought him here already? ...Hello there, I'm Tutoreiya. Just call me Tuya, please. I was studying in the land of humans until about a hundred years ago."

The boy seemed friendly enough.

According to his explanation, the village we were just in was constructed purely for visitors, intended to have "that elf-like touch."

That being said, it wasn't meant to be deceitful or mean-spirited. It was just a place for welcoming and entertaining guests. It was constructed about four hundred years ago, largely under the direction of the Saga Empire hero Daisaku, who grew weary of battle and came to live out the rest of his days in the land of the elves.

Now things were starting to make sense.

A forest village with tree houses was far closer to the image we Japanese people would have of an elf home than this semi-futuristic, half-underground city.

Getting fed up with my lengthy conversation with the boy, Mia yanked my hand impatiently, so I promised to chat with him some other time.

“Ride.”

Mia expertly hopped onto a Floating Board at the platform. It sank ever so slightly before returning to its original height.

At her urging, I jumped onto a board next to Mia’s. She stated a few numbers that sounded like an address, and the board took off.

Though I hadn’t given any commands, my platform shifted into motion to follow Mia’s.

Streetlights with a fluorescent-like brightness blinked as if to guide us along.

The houses were all fairly similar in size, on lots that were probably about seven thousand square feet. They all had slate roofs and walls of what looked like white resin.

Overall, the architecture struck me as more modern than anything fantastical.

It wasn’t long before I realized why: the windows.

In the Shiga Kingdom, most houses had relatively small windows made from wood boards, which were generally just holes for lighting and ventilation.

Here, though, the houses had large, clear glass windows and even had glass doors.

Duke Ougoch’s mansion did have windows made from orc glass, but they were used much more sparingly, and most of them had fixed fitting.

Here, the glass doors were set in frames that had a rail, so they could likely slide open and closed just like the sliding doors often found in contemporary Japanese houses.

Instead of metal walls or fences, the houses were generally separated by hedges or flower beds, mostly the latter, by my estimation.

But strangely, there didn’t seem to be anyone around. Were they all aboveground partying?

Our boards flew along at about twelve miles per hour, nearly skimming the ground as they went.

The road reminded me of asphalt or the surface of a hard court for tennis; it

seemed to be made of tiny pebbles that looked like brown beads.

I asked Mia what it was made out of, but she only said, “Dunno.”

That Tuya fellow seemed pretty knowledgeable, so I figured I’d ask him next time I saw him.

Finally, the boards came to a gentle stop in front of one particular house. Then they descended soundlessly, disappearing right into the ground.

“Satou.”

Mia touched the front door, and it slid open automatically with a pneumatic hiss.

Once she led me inside, the door slid closed behind us. Overall, it was very science-fiction-y. It would’ve been better if they were double doors like an air lock, though.

The moon was visible through the transparent dome-shaped ceiling and beyond the canopy over the city.

Its light was faint, though, probably because it was behind two layers of glass.

Mia was still pulling me along, so I followed her down the hallway.

I guess I shouldn’t have expected that to magically move, too.

“Here.”

Mia led me into what appeared to be her room.

Her parents must have cleaned it often while she was away; there wasn’t a speck of dust in sight.

There was one bed and one desk. Next to the bed were some built-in shelves, lined with a cutesy stuffed penguin and other plushies.

The entire room had a subdued pink color scheme. There were no decorative plants or anything like that. Overall, it looked like a middle school girl’s room.

“What a cute room.”

“Mm. Comfy.” Mia smiled shyly at my compliment.

...Did she just want to show me her room?

“Wait.”

With that command, Mia flounced into a small room that resembled a walk-in closet.

Then she paused and stuck her head out. “No peeking,” she added before vanishing inside, closing the door behind her.

What, did she think I would peek if she didn’t tell me not to?

Since I’d left without a word to anyone, I used the Telephone spell to contact Arisa.

“Yesh, thish ish your beloved Arisha!”

“...Are you drunk?”

“Huh? I’m cone-shold stober!”

“Don’t go too crazy, or I won’t give you any hangover medicine tomorrow.”

“Okey-dokey, artichokey.”

Arisa was clearly very drunk, so I politely ended the Telephone spell.

Next, I tried using it to connect with Liza, but there was no response. *She must be asleep.*

Finally, I contacted Mia’s mother to let her know that we were at their house.

“Satou.”

Mia poked her head out from the walk-in closet, took a moment to work up her courage, and hopped back into the room.

It was a very cute outfit, with a long-sleeve white blouse and a miniskirt with thin pleats.

Probably the most noticeable part, though, was...

“Knee socks.”

Just as she said, she was wearing knee socks pulled up tight on her slender legs.

I hadn’t seen them in this world before. Incidentally, they were white with light-blue horizontal stripes.

“They look very nice on you.”

Mia smiled bashfully and did a little twirl, making her skirt flutter.

Judging by the matching low-rise undies I saw beneath, she was apparently fond of stripes.

“Mia, may I?”

“Mm.”

Mia nodded, so I pinched the fabric of the knee socks between my fingers and tugged it experimentally. It was a mysterious fiber, clinging tightly to her legs despite its elasticity not being particularly strong.

If I could find out more about this by visiting some workshops during our stay, I could really widen the range of potential outfits for my party members.

“Perv.”

I glanced up to see Mia blushing, her cheeks puffed indignantly.

Oops, I guess it's rude to touch her socks while she's still wearing them.

“Sorry, sorry. I was just curious about the fabric.”

“Mrrr. Indelicate.”

That was some pretty advanced vocabulary for someone so young... *Wait, I guess Mia's several times older than me, huh?*

After I apologized, the rest of the evening turned into Mia's fashion show.

There was a lot more variety in her wardrobe than I had expected: the traditional garb the elves were wearing up in the tree village, a dress, an outfit with a skirt and three-quarter-length leggings, and so on.

As I later learned, that first one wasn't actually the traditional clothing of the elves but a design made by the hero Daisaku for the “elf theme park” that was the village in the trees.

Eventually, Mia got tired and fell asleep, so I put her to bed and ended up dozing off next to her myself.

Her soft, fluffy bed was too powerful to resist.

Before long, I was deep in a dreamless sleep.

“No-more-sneaking-out diiiiive!”

That shout, coupled with a sudden impact, shocked me awake.

Mia, who’d been asleep beside me, let out a rather unladylike “Geh!”

“Arisa, would you mind not diving on people first thing in the morning?”

As I grumbled, I checked the map.

Mia’s parents must have brought Arisa and the others to the underground town.

“This isn’t our usual joking around. This is your punishment,” Arisa intoned.

I was guessing she was making some kind of reference, but it went right over my head.

Since she didn’t seem to be hungover at all, the elves must have given her a hangover cure.

For some reason, she wasn’t wearing her blond wig, so her lilac hair was on full display.

“Mrrr. Heavy.”

“It’s your punishment for running away with master. Feel the wrath of the Lolita press!”

Despite both our protests, Arisa was still fuming.

“Master, this place is amaziing!”

“We rode on a board, and the door opened all by itself, sir!”



Liza entered the room, holding the excited pair of Tama and Pochi under her arms.

“Arisa, you mustn’t be so rude to master.”

“C’mon, Liza, I’m punishing some criminals here...”

Putting Tama and Pochi down on the floor, Liza lifted Arisa off the bed and freed Mia and me.

“Master, the underground city is amazing, I report.”

“To think that the elves had such a remarkable place hidden here!”

Nana and Lulu sounded more excited than usual, too. None of them could hide their surprise at the semi-underground cityscape.

“I gotta admit—it is pretty cool. Like a space-age colony or a hyperdimensional fortress.”

Once again, I wasn’t sure what Arisa was talking about, but she probably meant that it was very sci-fi. Now that she’d calmed down a little about my sharing a bed with Mia, I guess even Arisa was impressed with the elves’ secret home.

“Good morning, Mr. Satou.”

“Mia!”

My group stepped aside for Mia’s parents, who’d guided them here to the underground civilization.

I greeted them in return, but Mia’s father was glowering at our sleeping arrangements.

Her mother’s remark and Mia’s response, however...

“Oh my, aren’t you two close? How lovely.”

“Mm. Lovers.”

...served only to aggravate her father’s misunderstanding.

“Interspecies. Can’t reproduce.”

“Please calm down, dear.”

“No!”

“Just a moment, Mr. Laya...”

Mia’s father swiveled to glare at me.

I felt a little like a man trying to ask his lover’s disapproving parents for permission to marry.

“...We fell asleep together and nothing more. The rest of the kids usually sleep in my bed, too.”

“Harem?”

I had offered that particular fact in the hopes of conveying that it was no different than children sleeping with their parents, but Mia’s father took it in the worst possible way.

In the end, I wasn’t able to pacify his anger until Mia’s mother stepped in to help resolve the misunderstanding.

Actually, I wasn’t sure she cleared things up so much as she simply drowned out his protests with her machine gun–like chatter.

After a great deal of talking, Mia’s mother finally came to her main point.

Please cut to the chase a little faster next time.

“Mr. Satou, at some point, please tell me the story of how Mia became so attached to you, okay? I’m looking forward to it. For now, I’d like you to go see the Council of Elders, if you wouldn’t mind. They asked for you personally, you know.”

I agreed right away, of course. I might get to meet the high elf I’d been hearing so much about, after all.

Based on the elves I’d seen so far, I probably shouldn’t get my hopes up for a dynamite bod, but I was looking forward to such a rare opportunity for a meeting with her anyway.

The World Tree

Satou here. When I first started working at my company, meetings with the bigwigs made me nervous. But I got used to them after spending a lot of time dealing with unreasonable clients. I guess people really do grow according to their environments.

“Here.”

At Mia’s father’s prompting, I stepped onto the moving walkway, which was illuminated by footlights.

We were now in the center of Bolenan Forest, heading for the Council of Elders’s headquarters at the base of the World Tree.

We’d arrived at the tree the same way we’d traveled from the tree village to the underground city: teleportation by way of fairy rings.

Mia’s father, like his daughter, didn’t explain much, but I was guessing this was an area that could be reached only with teleportation.

When we first entered the area, I used “Search Entire Map,” but it didn’t include the upper or lower layers of the World Tree. So they were all part of different blocks.

Maybe they even had a system that resisted “Search Entire Map.”

As far as I could tell, this section of the World Tree went several miles underground.

I don’t remember how thick a planet’s crust is off the top of my head, but isn’t that pretty deep?

This was just the size of the structure we were in, too. The World Tree’s roots went even deeper and expanded even farther out than the forest itself.

Mia’s house was more than six miles away from this part of the World Tree.

It probably seemed relatively close only because of the absurdly huge size of the World Tree itself.

“Next. Jump.”

Following Mia’s father’s brief instructions, I ventured through a mysterious silver ring.

The materials that made up the cream-colored passages were equally unclear. My AR display labeled it **terpeet type-three resin corridor**. What in the world was “terpeet”?

Despite the passage’s modern appearance, the cool air smelled of a walk through the forest, and there was a gentle sound like leaves rustling in the breeze.

At the other end of the corridor, an automatic door opened with a hiss of air.

The first set of doors slid open to the left and right, revealing a second set that slid to the top and bottom.

Beyond this set of double doors was a straight hallway about sixty feet long, at the end of which was a similar set of doors. It was sort of like a submarine bulkhead.

Past this bulkhead was a narrower passage, which was suspended above a huge hangar.

“What are...?”

“Outboard hulls,” Mia’s father informed me.

Sure enough, the hangar was full of countless silver hulls that looked just like the hero Hayato’s dimensional submarine, the *Jules Verne*. They were suspended in the air, their bows pointing up toward the ceiling.

In the back of the hangar were twin-boom aircrafts, wooden hulls, and even some traditional sailing ships.

“Are these all airships?”

“No. Just hulls.”

“They seem to be floating, though...”

“Dimension Pile.”

If memory served, Dimension Pile was a Space Magic spell that could suspend physical objects in midair.

He was probably saying that the countless hulls in the hangar were being held in place with Dimension Pile.

...I was getting pretty good at filling in the blanks with these elves.

At any rate, all the ships were sparkling clean. My AR display revealed how they were being kept so free of rust and decay.

“Fixed?”

“Mm. Practical. Protects.”

Again, this was all speculation based on his few words, but maybe they were using Practical Magic to coat the hulls in a pseudo-substance that protected them from oxidation.

I seemed to remember seeing a spell like that described in the Advanced Practical Magic spell book I’d read at a noble’s house in the old capital.

It wouldn’t work on weapons, but you could use a certain amount of magic power supply to maintain the “Fixed” state, so lords used them in their Item Boxes and things like that.

As I gazed around at the ships, I spotted some engineer-looking elves who seemed to be searching for something among the hulls.

“Are you sure Traya really made a Void Ship?”

“How strange. I could’ve sworn it was here...”

I searched the map, but the Void Ship they were looking for didn’t seem to be in this area.

“Jia, if it’s not here, we’ll have to wake Yua up from the sleep tank...”

“No, you know we can’t do that.”

The two people below started quarreling about something.

What’s a “sleep tank”?

“Satou. Come.”

Mia’s father pulled my sleeve, reminding me that this was not our destination.

Once we crossed the bridge and exited the hangar, we stepped onto a glowing Floating Board that carried us up a slope.

I saw quite a few similar passages, but there was no one around except us.

There were tens of thousands of elves here, ten times more than the elf population aboveground, so I was surprised that we hadn’t seen anyone else but the pair of engineers before.

Checking the map, I learned that most of the elves in this area had the **Sleeping** condition. Today must be a day off. I wondered if they were sleeping in the “sleep tanks” I’d overheard that pair talking about. Unlike the elves up above, many of these were over ten thousand years old. Their levels were relatively high, but none seemed to be above level 50, not even the oldest among them.

I wanted to ask Mia’s father about them, but he would probably just ask how I came across that information, so I couldn’t say a word.

Aside from the elves, there were eight high elves in this area of the World Tree.

Perhaps they were elf royalty, like you’d find in fantasy stories.

Like the others, most of them were sleeping, but their levels ranged from the 50s to the 70s.

Maybe they had some reason for not leveling up higher than that.

As I was processing all this information, we arrived at our destination, and the Floating Board we’d been riding re-assimilated with the ground.

In front of our eyes was an octagonal door about ten feet tall. Though the corridors we’d traversed to get here were all resin, this area used real wood.

A gap appeared from the top of the octagon, and the door opened like an old-fashioned camera shutter.

It was just the kind of door you’d see in classic science fiction movies.

“Satou.” Mia’s father called to me from the other side of the door.

Oops, I’d been staring at the door for so long, he’d gone in without me. Quickly, I followed behind him.

On the other side of the door was a parliament-like building so big it could probably hold more than a thousand people.

Soft light descended from a skylight above, illuminating the passage that led to the platform in the back.

I couldn’t see her from here, but the only conscious high elf seemed to be in the waiting room ahead.

Does this mean I get to meet her?

My heart fluttered with excitement as I followed Mia’s father to the platform. Twenty or so elders were sitting in raised seats around it.

I sat down next to Mia’s father in a section that reminded me of a defendant’s podium.

“Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. We are most grateful for your aid.”

“Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. We will not forget the debt owed you for delivering our youngest child from the clutches of the wicked sorcerer.”

“Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. We wish to reward you for bringing our little one home from faraway lands.”

“Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. We are pleased...” And so on.

Thus, each and every one of the elders thanked me for bringing Mia home. For some reason, they all started their statements with “Satou of the Shiga Kingdom.”

Was there a rule forcing them to use that phrase or something?

They must have known somehow that I spoke Elvish, since that was what they were using.

Despite being elders, they didn’t look much older than Mia’s father.

However, their eyes were different.

They were so quiet and calm that they seemed almost distant. It was sort of like looking into the eyes of an ancient tortoise.

Their gazes were so steady that they felt a little icy if you made eye contact for too long.

I guess that was what happened when you lived for thousands of years. I'd love to befriend them and hear stories of the olden days.

Still, though the black dragon Hei Long was much older than they were, he somehow seemed a lot younger. I wasn't sure whether their races accounted for this difference or if it was just his individual personality.

Once all of them had given their thanks, a curtain rose in the back of the parliament room, and a group of elves emerged on a Floating Board the size of a small room.

The eagerly anticipated high elf was in the center, surrounded by four Elvish shrine maidens.

Unlike Sara and the other maidens in the old capital, who wore Western priestess-style clothing, these elves were wearing Japanese shrine maiden-style dress. All proper shrine maidens should have red *hakama* and a white *haori*.

However, these weren't any ordinary shrine maiden outfits. They were also decked out with golden crowns and bells, like for the Kagura dance, and a transparent *chihaya* jacket embroidered with silver thread—no, with mithril.

Unfortunately, I couldn't see the high elf yet. She was hidden behind a floating bamboo screen. It must have been magic of some kind.

The glowing board passed through the line of elders, coming to a stop in front of me.

““““Quiet, please,”””” the shrine maidens called, ringing their bells.

The room was already silent, but now wasn't the time for my snarky observations.

““““A word from Lady Holytree.””””

They must be referring to the high elf.

Her real name seemed to be Aialize, so “Lady Holytree” must have been her official position or a second name or something. According to the AR display, her title was **Pure Maiden**, and her occupation was **World Tree: Warden of Earth**.

The bamboo screen slid open, revealing Aialize.

Wow, she’s young.

The girl before me looked even younger than Arisa, barely old enough to start school.

Her facial features were similar to Mia’s, but she had silver hair and red eyes, distinguishing her from the blue-green hair and eyes of ordinary elves. Like them, however, her ears were only slightly pointed.

Whoa!

Checking her age out of curiosity, my jaw nearly dropped in shock. She was hundreds of millions of years old!

Most of the dryads I met were near that range, but Miss Aialize was on another level.

I had never seen nine digits in the age column before. Just trying to count them made me dizzy.

But why did she look like a young girl...?

“Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. You...erm, *thou* hast done well to bring Misanaria to the Bolenan Forest.”

...Huh?

“I am very grateful to, um, thee.”

What’s going on with her speech?

Her sentences started off confident enough, but then she kept hesitating and switching to more classical-sounding words.

And although her voice was generally much more composed than one would expect from her childish appearance, she put on a strange, overdramatic voice when saying “thou” and “thee” and so on.

It was like an anime fan trying to imitate a voice actor.

I looked around at the elders, but they were as expressionless as ever.

The shrine maidens, on the other hand, were covering their faces, but I could see their shoulders shaking.

“What’s the mat— Um, pray tell, what troubles thee?”

The young girl tilted her head.

Hmm? Wait, what’s that?

Overlapping with the young girl standing before me, I could see a woman who appeared to be in her twenties, kneeling demurely.

The little girl was an illusion, then. Just like when I’d seen through the white tigerfolk’s illusions at the dark auction, this sort of technique didn’t seem to work on me.

Her real appearance was beautiful, if not quite as much so as Lulu: pale-blond hair, blue eyes, thin lips, and a perfectly shaped nose. She was completely my type, to be quite honest.

It was hard to tell through the layers of the white *haori* and the *chihaya*, but her chest seemed to be a C or D cup.

And though I wasn’t sure, since she was sitting, she looked to be around my height.

Now, that’s what I’m talking about!

If you asked me, I hadn’t met nearly enough beautiful adult women in this alternate world. It was always little girls for some reason.

The likes of Sara and Zena were too young to be possible romantic partners, and my traveling companions and Karina and such were more like my adopted kids.

Oh, I was so glad we came to Bolenan Forest.

“As for your reward, what do you wa—? Is there anything thine heart desires?”

The illusion of the little girl looked smug and confident, but the real Aialize’s face was a little red.

Clearly this little farce wasn't her idea.

She was probably going along with a surprise planned by some other elves.

I couldn't help being captivated by her shy, slightly frustrated expression.

"Well then, Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. As a reward, I shall allow thee one kiss."

Whoops. I should've been listening a bit more carefully.

The illusion of the girl extended her arms in a welcoming gesture and appeared to be puckering her lips.

The real woman kept her eyes down, plainly embarrassed now.

I definitely didn't want to kiss a little girl, but I wouldn't say no to the gorgeous adult behind her.

Based on my past experience with Mia, this was probably just meant to be a light kiss, like a European greeting.

I stepped forward in one smooth motion, then without missing a beat, I put my hand on the cheek of the real woman before me.

I nearly gave in to the temptation to kiss her right on the lips, but she was the representative of the high elves, after all.

Better to restrain myself, then.

When I rescued Mia, she thanked me by kissing me on the forehead, so I did the same now to Miss Aialize, barely brushing my lips against her forehead.

Since she didn't react, I looked down questioningly to find that she was as red as a lobster. Steam was practically coming out of her ears. *She's as bad as Miss Karina.*

Aialize wobbled and started to fall over, so I hurriedly caught her.

It looked like she had fainted.

Oops. Maybe I wasn't supposed to do that?



"Satou of the Shiga Kingdom, our sincerest apologies for Holytree's tactless

blunder.”

In a separate room, a single elder apologized to me with a very serious expression.

“No, I’m the one who should apologize. Was it terribly rude of me to kiss her on the forehead?”

“No, but...placing a kiss above the brow is a sacred act. We do not do such things lightly.”

I see... I guess I surprised Miss Aialize, then.

Well, at least it wasn’t offensive or anything.

“Lady Aaze is resting now in the medical office. Lua will care for her there.”

“Is she all right?”

“Yes, she’ll be fine after some rest. She was simply a bit light-headed.”

The shrine maidens, who’d just returned to the room, giggled.

“Still, it is common for elves who have come of age to kiss one another on the forehead. I was surprised to see Lady Aaze get so flustered.”

“Kua.”

The elder elf scolded the chatty shrine maiden in a deep voice, then turned to me.

“As we were saying before, we elves of the Bolenan clan are pleased to welcome you to our home. Please do use the guest house until we have finished building a home for you.”

...Wait, what? Building a home?

“Oh, it’s not necessary for you to go to all that trouble. We’re more than happy to stay in the tree house while we are here.”

“But surely a house in the trees can’t be very comfortable for you, can it? Why, building a house hardly takes a year, so it’s no trouble.”

The shrine maidens blinked at me in confusion.



I guess elves' sense of the passage of time was further off from mine than I'd realized.

It sounded as if they'd all assumed we'd be staying there for at least a year.

I was planning to stay roughly two weeks at most, but now I was concerned that it would seem rude if I left too quickly.

"Well, even if you are content to live in a tree house, there must be some other way we can repay you for rescuing Mia. Is there anything you desire?"

"Will thank."

"You are free to thank him personally, Laya. However, what I refer to is a gift of thanks from all the elves as a whole."

"Mm. Okay."

Mia's father seemed pacified by the elder's words.

It wasn't like I'd brought Mia home because I wanted a reward, but it might be rude to say "No need to thank me" or something like that. I'd run into a similar situation with the nobles in the old capital.

My best bet would be to ask for something easy.

"Then might I ask permission to go sightseeing in the Bolenan Forest?"

"But of course. However..."

The elder gave us free rein to go anywhere, with the exception of places like elves' individual homes, studios, or off-limits areas of the World Tree, which would require permission from the elves in charge of those places.

Once the welcoming banquet for Mia finally settled down, I was looking forward to going sightseeing with everyone.

"Now then, have you decided on a reward?"

Huh? Getting permission to go sightseeing was good enough for me...

But then the image of the metal hulls and sailing ships I saw in the huge hangar earlier crossed through my mind.

I was thinking of traveling by air or sea from the Bolenan Forest to Labyrinth

City next, so it was perfect timing.

“Well, I did pass through the hangar earlier...”

On a whim, I asked if I could have the outer hull of a ship. After a moment’s contemplation, the elder agreed.

I later learned that he’d been hesitating over whether such an imperfect product was really a sufficient reward.

With that, I now had a fun little remodeling project to occupy me during my stay.



“Lua, waterrr...”

The high elf Aialize, who was stretched out on a faintly glowing transparent bed, sat up with sleep still in her eyes.

“It appears Lady Aaze has just awoken.”

After my conversation with the elders, I’d gone to see how Aialize was doing. Apparently, my timing was perfect.

Lua, one of the shrine maidens, handed her a cup of water.

The cup looked like glass, but when I held one myself, it felt more like plastic. According to my AR display, it was called an **alua goblet**, so “alua” must be the name of the mysterious material.

“Ugh, I knew Daisaku had to be wrong about that. Why would he tell me that high elves are supposed to be little girls with silver hair who say ‘thou’ and ‘thee’ and all that nonsense?”

“Lady Aaze...”

Lua was trying to inform Aialize that I was present, but she was too busy grumbling to notice.

“I know, I know. I shouldn’t speak ill of the deceased, but—”

“Lady Aaze!”

Miss Aialize puffed up her cheeks, not unlike Mia when she was cross.

It was pretty cute, though. If I let my guard down, I'd likely fall for her in a heartbeat.

"Come on—can't you let me rant a little? He definitely thinks I'm a weirdo now. I hope we haven't given Mia's savior a terrible impression of the elves—"

"Lady Aaze!!"

Sure, she seemed a little emotionally unstable at the moment, but I found her rapidly changing expressions endearing.

"I mean, he wasn't even there when I went to the upper village yesterday to say hello to Mia after I finished my business. And what was that Arisa girl on about? 'Yes, high elves are always silver-haired little girls, no doubt about it!?' Not to mention telling me that her master would never accept a kiss from a little girl..."

"Oh, Lady Aaze..."

So Arisa had a hand in this, too, huh?

"This is why you can't let your guard down around the people of Nihon. They always mess around like this!"

It sounded like she'd met multiple Japanese people in the past, most of whom were probably as ridiculous as Arisa.

That's bad luck on her part. Some Japanese people are normal like me, you know.

Actually, how did she know that Arisa was Japanese anyway?

I doubted Arisa would've just told her, so she must have figured it out because of her telltale purple hair, generally a sign of a reincarnation.

I should've made sure she was wearing her blond wig.

"Lady Arisa, please listen to me."

"Honestly! What *is* it, Lua?"

In response, Lua simply pointed toward me.

Aialize's head turned oh so slowly, like a tinman whose neck joints needed to be oiled.

Then our eyes met.

Immediately, Miss Aialize flew into a flustered panic.

The contrast between her composed, grown-up appearance and her unguarded carelessness was pretty cute. Was this what they called “gap moe”?

At any rate, I should probably give her an out. This seemed to be partly Arisa’s fault, after all.

“Miss Lua told me that you have been abed with a fever since this morning. To the point where you were even speaking deliriously, correct?”

I used my “Fabrication” skill to make up an excuse for her and then passed the baton to Lua.

“Th-that’s right, Lady Aaze. You still seem to have a fever, so please rest for the rest of the day, all right?”

Lua caught on quickly. Now Aialize could blame her strange behavior on a high fever.

Promising to come back to visit once Miss Aialize was feeling better, I took my leave for the day.

According to Lua, there was something Aialize wanted to talk to me about.

I had a bad feeling about that somehow, but no harm could come of hearing her out, I was sure.

When I came back to the tree house where Mia’s welcome-home party was still taking place, for some reason, Mia ordered me to “Kneel.”

Mia’s father had returned before me, but he didn’t seem to be the one who snitched. It wasn’t long before I noticed the three of the shrine maidens standing behind Arisa and Mia, giggling away as they snacked on pastries.

Next time, I’d have to make some extra-spicy cookies just for those gossipy blabbermouths.

Studying on the Stone Stage

Satou here. I've kind of got a thing for women who teach. Especially when they're strict and serious in the classroom but turn into total good-for-nothings at home. Unfortunately, older women never seem to be interested in me.

"Master, I brought you some peculiar tea cakes."

"Thank you, Arisa."

Arisa plopped down beside me, carrying a basket full of what looked like tiny cupcakes.

Though they appeared plain, they were actually filled with fresh fruit.

"There's no alcohol in this, is there?"

"I keep telling you: I won't make that mistake again!" Arisa laughed.

Arisa and the others got drunk on our first day here, although they weren't supposed to drink alcohol. As it turned out, the culprit was the liquor that was used to flavor the pastries they were given, which wasn't cooked long enough to lose its potency.

We were now in the living room of the tree house where we'd partied that first day; we'd been staying there ever since.

Mia's family offered to let us stay in their home in the underground city, but I didn't want to impose when they'd just been reunited with their child at long last.

However, considering that Mia's welcome-home party was still going on four days later, maybe that was a misplaced concern.

Tons of elves were still gathered around Mia, chattering away. Mia, meanwhile, was clinging to her parents as any child of her appearance might, which was adorable to witness.

Tama and Pochi were popular not just with the elves but also with the brownies who did the cleaning and serving, who were beginning to treat them like beloved pets.

“Duck jerkyyy?”

“This is red-deer jerky, sir!”

“Correct.”

“You girls are pretty good! Here, this one’ll stump you for sure...”

They were being fed at the moment or, rather, playing a game where they tried to identify the type of jerky by taste.

Liza stood behind the two of them, making sure they didn’t get too rowdy. Of course, she was also rerouting any jerky she was given directly into her stomach.

“Nana, more.”

“So soft.”

“These pastries are delish!”

While Nana had gotten off on the wrong foot with the fairies by being too forceful with them, now she seemed to have won them over with the help of some baked goods.

The winged fairies sat on her shoulders and head, munching away contentedly.

Except for the lucky bastard who’d said “So soft”—that one was nestled between her breasts again. *Seriously, trade places with me.*

The fairies spoke only Elvish, so my girls were wearing translation rings to help with communication.

The rings had been given to us by Mia’s parents. They were similar to the borrowed ones the Japanese summons were wearing when I met them along with Princess Menea in the Lumork Kingdom.

They must be rare, since I didn’t even have any in my spoils from the Valley of Dragons, yet they were letting all the kids borrow them indefinitely for free.

From what I heard, there was an elf who used to be obsessed with making translation rings, so they weren't particularly uncommon in Bolenan.

I would've liked to ask how they were made, but unfortunately, the elf in question was sleeping in the World Tree.

I asked a drunken elf about it at the party, and he explained the whole situation.

"Basically, sleep tanks are for people who've grown tired of living, are afraid of their memories fading, and so on. Our memories can last around five hundred years without a problem, but after that, they start to fade. I'm told the elders, who've lived for thousands or even tens of thousands of years, are even starting to lose their emotions."

That made sense. So some of the elves were sleeping to preserve their precious memories.

It would be unthinkable for any living creature's brain to retain new information indefinitely.

"Are the high elves the same?"

Unlike ordinary elves, the high elves like Miss Aialize had lived for hundreds of millions of years.

"High elves have the memory archive, so they don't have to worry about their memories fading. They only use the sleep tanks because they're bored of living, or else they loathe themselves so much that—"

A serious-looking elf abruptly elbowed the drunken one, cutting off his explanation.

I must have touched on one of the elves' taboo topics.

Just as things were getting a bit awkward, Mia's bright voice bailed me out.

"Satou."

Mia, who'd been hanging off her father's arm not long before, now came over with three youthful elves.

The tearful reunions had died down since the second day or so, but there

were still a few elves coming in for the first time, each of whom Mia politely introduced to me.

“Soya. Puya. Aea.”

...Actually, there wasn't anything particularly polite about that intro.

“So you're the Satou who beat Laya at shogi.”

“Strong.”

“Well, Laya is the weakest of the Bolenan Game Association's Four Kings of the Dawn! Do you really think your shogi can defeat the likes of us?!”

That was definitely a startling level of bravado, but I'd learned over the past few days that Daisaku the Hero was behind a lot of the elves' cultural oddities.

Laya, Mia's father, frowned and muttered, “Mrrr, rude,” but to his disappointment, everyone ignored him.

As an aside, I should note that the Game Association had several series of kings besides Kings of the Dawn. There were Kings “of the Dusk,” “of the Gale,” and so on.

Since I'd been crushing the elves at shogi for a while now, I'd gained titles like Shogi Master and King of Games.

“You'd like to play me in shogi? Fine.”

“All right, me first.”

“Since you're all here, why don't I take on all three of you at once?”

“Arrogant.”

“Hmph, you'll live to regret those words!”

Most elves seemed to hate losing, which meant a lot of them demanded extra time like Mia's father, so I decided to keep things quick by taking on all three “kings” at once.

Since my youthful new body in this parallel world had a maxed-out INT skill, playing multiple games at the same time was no problem for me.

As a result, I wound up getting a skill called “Parallel Thoughts.”

Unfortunately, it wasn't as impressive as the name made it sound. In CPU terms, it was comparable to multi-threaded parallel processing rather than multi-core, so my total processing power remained the same.

If anything, I'd describe it as making me a master of multitasking.

Just as all three games were stopped by simultaneous "Wait!" demands, Lulu came upstairs from the kitchen in an apron.

The elf girls who loved cooking were with her, too.

Nea, a girl who was studying the Japanese cuisine Daisaku the Hero described long ago, was first to arrive.

"Mr. Satou, I made the hamburg steak we discussed yesterday. Could you evaluate it for me, please?"

"Yes, I'd be happy to."

Nea placed a line of her steaks in front of me. Since they were just for tasting, they were all bite-size portions.

One was essentially a meatball, one had been made into a paste and cooked, one had been cut into noodle-like shapes and then braided together before being grilled, one just looked like a lump of meat, and finally, the last one actually looked like hamburg steak.

The reason so many of them looked nothing like hamburg steak was that the only description this Daisaku had given was the vague "a grilled dish made of kneaded meat."

This guy knew even less about cooking than I did.

"Only one of them actually looks like hamburg steak, but they're all pretty tasty."

"Yes, I agree."

Although I wasn't sure why Arisa was helping me evaluate.

"This paste one and the braided noodles here are especially tasty."

They weren't hamburg steaks or any dish I'd ever seen on Earth. They'd fit in just fine at a restaurant specializing in creative cuisine, though.

The other reason Nea's hamburg steaks weren't coming out like hamburg steaks was that she was using nothing but meat.

She described them as "100 percent beef," so this was probably another misguided description from Daisaku.

With no ingredients but meat, a dish could easily get dried out, but evidently the elves had solved that problem through a few hundred years of trial and error.

A few hundred years, huh...? Elves really did have a different grasp of time from ordinary humans.

Still, I had no idea how she'd managed to make noodles out of meat.

After Lulu did some sampling as well, she went back to the kitchen to make hamburg steak the way I'd taught her.

"I have over a hundred other variations, but I think these five are the closest to the dish that Sir Daisaku described."

"That's remarkable. I'd love to try every one of them during the course of my stay."

"Of course! You saved Mia's life, after all. I'll happily cook them all for you."

It was a brazen request on my part, but Nea was quick to agree.

The other elf girls with her wanted to share their recipes with me, too. Lulu and I had a lot of cooking and learning to do while we were here.

Grrrrwwwl.

I heard two stomachs growl adorably in unison and turned to find Tama and Pochi gazing at us hungrily.

You'd never guess from their expressions that they'd just had a jerky-eating contest.

"Do you want to try?"

"Aye-aye!"

"Yes, sir!"

“If I can be of help, it would be my pleasure.”

Tama’s and Pochi’s hands shot into the air before I even finished my offer.

Liza, too, appeared behind them, seemingly out of nowhere. Her expression was composed as usual, but her tail was whipping back and forth, so no doubt she was waiting for this chance.

I let Tama and Pochi try first, but...

“Huuuh? This isn’t hambuuurg.”

“Hamburg steaks are softer and juicier, sir! They make you happy when you chomp into them, sir!”

Pochi was waving her arms wildly as she addressed Nea, so I took the fork out of her hand, just to be safe.

Liza nodded sagely after tasting each sample. Her tail had calmed a little, so I was guessing she judged them to be only satisfactory.

Then Lulu brought up her freshly cooked hamburg steak.

It was plated like a proper restaurant dish: a hot cast-iron skillet on top of a wooden plate.

Nea inhaled the scent with what could only be described as a rapturous expression and then stared at the steak as if trying to memorize every last detail. *You should probably eat it before it gets cold.*

“Go ahead and try it.”

Cutting off a small portion with her fork and knife, she carried the first bite to her mouth.

Pochi and Tama were drooling as they followed the fork with their eyes.

I glanced at Liza, but while her mouth was open a little, at least there wasn’t any drool. There was no need to specify what she was looking at, of course.

All that being said...

I think crying while you eat is a little bit much, no?

But for Nea, it was her first taste of a legendary dish, so I guess maybe it was

understandable.

Considering her skills, I figured she'd be able to reproduce it in no time now that she'd tasted the real thing.

"Satou." Mia, who'd been watching from next to her parents, was suddenly at my side. "Tofu steak."

Mia clung to my neck, rubbing her cheek against mine pleadingly.

Arisa promptly began trying to peel her off, her smile twitching.

Quit being so childish, you two.

I kept this thought to myself, instead patting Mia's cheek gently to pacify her.

"As you wish, milady," I said teasingly.



She relinquished her grip on me at that, so I picked up Pochi and Tama and brought them with me to the kitchen so that Nea could eat in peace.

Lulu came along to help, so aside from the tofu hamburg steak Mia requested, I also made Japanese-style steaks, hamburg stew, hamburgers with tomato, and so on.

Including plates for certain hungry little girls, of course.

When I returned with the finished tofu hamburg steak, we had more visiting elves than before.

As far as I could tell, the rumor had spread via word of mouth that you could eat a real hamburg steak here.

"I'll be right back with more hamburg steaks, so please wait a little longer."

"Mm, okay."

"I'm so excited, I can hardly wait!"

I greeted the elves lightly as I brought Mia her tofu dish. "Here you go, Mia. Your order is ready."

"Mm. Thanks."

When Mia's parents and the other elves saw the dish I placed in front of Mia, a ripple of surprise ran through the crowd.

All eyes were on the youngest elf as she brought a piece of the tofu hamburg steak to her mouth.

After a moment of chewing, Mia closed her eyes and let out a little noise of contentment.

""Mia ate meat!"" the elves exclaimed in a chorus.

You don't need to react that dramatically, do you?

"Good."

"We're so proud, Mia. That's wonderful. We'll have to make red rice to celebrate, now, won't we?"

Her parents both embraced her joyously, but Mia looked a little perplexed

about why her meal was being interrupted.

No, if anything, she looked triumphant.

Yep. My plan was a success.

I cackled inwardly at pulling off my scheme.

After checking with Mia's parents in advance to make sure she didn't have any meat allergies, I made this particular hamburg tofu with about 10 percent meat mixed in, no fat included.

It didn't taste meaty when I tried it, and sure enough, Mia hadn't noticed that there was meat in it.

I decided to wait until after I'd increased the amount of meat a little more before letting Mia know.

Bwa-ha-ha. I'll get you to eat a balanced diet yet!

> Skill Acquired: "Trickster"

"That's a scary smile you've got there, master," Arisa remarked.

My villainous thoughts must have snuck into my expression somehow.

I guess "Poker Face" didn't work as well if you let your guard down too much.

Just then, Lulu returned with a mountain of various hamburg steak dishes.

Liza looked like she wanted to help, so I had her bring up some spare plates.

"Thank you for waiting. Please enjoy."

With that, the elves set about trying each of the kinds of steaks.

"Tasty."

"This is delicious! It's so soft, it practically melts in your mouth!"

The elves gave the hamburg steaks rave reviews all around.

With Lulu's and Liza's help, I cooked up more hamburg steaks, but I couldn't seem to churn them out fast enough. The allure of "the legendary hamburg steaks the hero spoke of" was too strong.

I might have been stuck in the kitchen until the following day if Nea and her

two friends didn't step in to help. Once I taught them the recipe, they were able to start mass-producing hamburg steaks in other tree houses to lighten the load.

I went through a lot of my regular meat stock, but I still had plenty of monster meat even if you didn't include all that whale, so it wasn't a big deal.

In exchange, the overjoyed elves presented me with livestock like giant sheep and crimson chickens.

These would be kept in the large stable carved into the roots of this tree, where living dolls were already taking care of our horses, the runosaur, and so on.

"Good work today, Lulu."

"It was nothing."

When our work was finally finished, Lulu and I ate some of the local cuisine the elves had brought us, watching with satisfaction as the last of our guests devoured their hamburg steaks with visible delight.



""""Hey, boy, you've got a visitor.""""

After breakfast on our seventh day in the elf village, the mysterious carvings that hung in the living room suddenly started talking all at once.

Thoroughly alarmed, Tama froze in the middle of our game of shogi-piece Jenga, her tail poofing up immediately.

Pochi's eyes widened, too, and she almost fell out of her chair but managed to catch herself before Liza had to pull her up.

Obviously, these mystery carvings were some kind of intercom.

They hadn't moved once during the party, which had finally wound down, so some kind soul must have activated them for us on their way out.

I wondered if the mirror hanging next to them would reflect an image of the visitor, but I guess it wasn't quite that advanced.

As soon as I stood up, the carvings stopped talking.

“I’ll go and look.”

Lulu hurried downstairs to welcome the guests.

“Good morning, Mr. Satou.”

“Good morning.”

I was surprised to see who Lulu had returned with.

“Welcome, Lady Aialize, Miss Lua.”

I invited the shrine maiden Lua and the high elf Miss Aialize into the room.

“Come on, Lady Aaze.”

“Nnngh, I know, I know. Don’t push me, Lua.”

Miss Aialize was stiff and quiet, so Lua prodded her shoulder a few times.

“Master, we’ll go take the horses on a walk.”

“Sure, thanks.”

Noticing that Aialize seemed to be having a hard time speaking, Arisa tactfully ushered the rest of the party out of the room.

“I’m terribly sorry if we’ve caused any trouble...”

I reassured Lua that everything was fine and offered the two a seat.

Miss Aialize, who was obviously shyer than I realized, just stared at the floor and fidgeted without saying a word.

“Come on, Lady Aaze. I understand you’re upset that he saw you at your worst, but being shy about it won’t get you anywhere, all right?”

With that, Lua grabbed Aialize’s head and jerked it upright, forcing her to look at me directly.

Yikes, no violence, please!

I understood her feelings, but I’d hate for Miss Aialize to get hurt in the process.

Now that we were making eye contact, Aialize looked even more panicked, but she forced herself to speak.

“I-I’m sorry about earlier!”

She ducked her head without any further explanation.

She was probably referring to the illusion of the little silver-haired girl.

“No, no. If anything, I should apologize for taking your words literally and kissing you directly, Lady Aialize. I hope it was not too unpleasant an experience.”

Her face flushed at that. “N-no, it wasn’t...”

I would have turned a bit red myself if not for the help of my “Poker Face” skill.

“Let us agree that neither of us was at fault, then, shall we?”

“If that’s all right with you, Satou...”

Aialize sighed with relief, and an awkward silence descended.

“The rumors were true. Your spirit light is beautiful, Mr. Satou.”

Miss Lua, her eyes now silver, kindly changed the subject for both of us.

“Is that right?” I responded. “I’m not able to see this ‘spirit light,’ so I can’t really tell myself...”

“All that light, yet you don’t have any ‘Spirit Vision’?”

Lua looked surprised.

“Heroes have the strangest gaps in their abilities, don’t they? Daisaku was the same way,” Aialize commented, casually dropping the bombshell. The first to respond was Lua.

“Mr. Satou is a hero?”

“You knew that, didn’t you, Lua? He’s the hero with the rainbow-colored spirit light who was fighting the black dragon.”

That’s right. When Hei Long and I were doing battle, Miss Aialize used some kind of Clairvoyance spell from the World Tree to look at me.

At the time, though, I was disguised as Nanashi, so I’d better play innocent for now.

“Erm, what might you be referring to?”

Aialize tilted her head.

“When you were fighting in the mountains... Wait, hmm? You don’t have the Hero title today.” Analyze was among Aialize’s many gifts. “Now that I think about it, your name was blank back then, and your levels and skills are different now, too.”

“Couldn’t it have been someone else, then?”

“Ah-ha-ha, of course not! There can’t be anyone else with such a strong and distinctive spirit light.”

I tried to feign ignorance, but Aialize simply laughed at me.

“Neither the sky dragons nor even we high elves can emit such a splendid spirit light.” As she gazed at me in utter fascination, the only word for her expression was *beautiful*, but I couldn’t appreciate it at that moment. “Oh dear, were you trying to keep your identity a secret?”

“Well...yes. If anyone powerful were to find out that I’m a hero, I’m afraid it would lead to all kinds of trouble...”

It’d be one thing if I were alone, but I couldn’t have my friends getting caught up in anything dangerous. Besides, all I really wanted was to enjoy a laid-back sightseeing journey.

“Hmm. I see.”

Miss Aialize didn’t seem convinced. Then, Lua leaned over to whisper something in her ear. She must have used some kind of security magic tool or something, because even with “Keen Hearing,” I couldn’t make it out.

Normally, I’d probably brace myself for an “I’ll keep your secret if you do this and that for me” kind of threat, but I doubted these elves would say anything of the sort.

So far, they all seemed to be pretty frank, so if they wanted something from me, they would probably just ask without trying to bargain for it.

“Then I! Shall be! Your teacher!”

Aialize stood up and clenched her fists as she made this declaration. I wasn't sure what she was going to teach me, though, so I waited patiently for her next statement.

My staring seemed to embarrass her, however, as she turned red and quickly sat back down.

Geez. What was she so worked up about, exactly?

"Ahem! That is to say, as thanks for bringing Mia back home, I shall teach you how to control your spirit light!"

"Really? I couldn't possibly ask you to do that. Are you sure?"

"But of course!"

She ducked behind the short-statured Lua as she spoke.

It was like watching a timid teacher hiding behind a middle school student.

Thus, I became the pupil of the slightly less-than-dependable Professor Aialize.

With the help of a dryad's teleportation, we traveled to a rocky area some twenty miles away from the World Tree.

Evidently, dryads could send you pretty much anywhere within the Bolenan Forest.

"This way, Mr. Satou."

Lua the shrine maiden led the way along the rocks until we reached an area overlooking a waterfall.

There, we had an unencumbered view of the World Tree in all its glory.

"It certainly is large, isn't it?"

"Indeed. The Mountain-Trees are quite large as well, but the World Tree is in a class all its own."

Honestly, I was surprised it didn't collapse in on itself due to its sheer weight.

In fact, I decided to ask about that.

"According to the elders, the World Tree itself maintains a Dimension Pile

spell that supports its weight.”

That was the same spell that had been holding up the ship hulls I saw before.

Lua continued leading me forward as we chatted. Eventually, we reached a huge rock that was placed in front of the waterfall to form a stone stage. Miss Aialize, who’d gone on ahead, was there waiting for us.

That was all well and good.

But what was up with her outfit?

She had donned a white shirt, a tight skirt, and even glasses with triangular lenses. On top of that, her hair was tied up in a bun behind her head, with a few strands hanging loose on either side of her face. The short wand she was holding was probably being used in place of a pointing stick.

Basically, it was the most stereotypical “lady teacher” outfit I’d ever seen.

That hero Daisaku sure did a number on the elves’ culture, didn’t he?

But I didn’t mind the eye candy this time around, so I decided not to worry about it.

“You’re late, Satou.”

If you’re going to blush that much, why would you cosplay in the first place?

I was tempted to stare derisively, but I didn’t think we’d get anywhere that way, so I just put my “Poker Face” skill to work.

“My apologies.”

“Lady Aaze, can’t you stop playing around and put on a proper outfit?”

“But Daisaku said this outfit would give a plus-one effect to my ‘Education’ skill!”

“I think that was a joke.”

Aialize seemed less shocked by Lua’s anger than she was by the revelation that the “‘Education’ skill plus-one effect” was a lie.

...Why would you believe that anyway?

While I waited for Aialize to regain her composure, I looked down at the

scenery of the waterfall from atop the stone stage.

It wasn't quite as impressive as the famous Niagara Falls, but it was still magnificent to see several waterfalls flowing down a single edge.

There was water pouring off the rocks floating along the quay, too. Was it a similar contrivance to my Well Bag, perhaps? Regardless, it was a mystical sight.

Someone cleared her throat loudly behind me, so I turned around.

There was Miss Aialize, changed back into her shrine maiden clothes. It had taken everything in my power not to turn around when I heard them rustling as she changed.

"Now then, before the lesson begins, please take this."

Lua, who was currently serving as Aialize's assistant, handed me a packet of blue powder.

"What is it?"

It looked a bit like the sapphire powder I'd seen in a jewelry workshop in the old capital. Occasionally, it sparkled with light, so it must be some kind of magical drug.

The AR display said it was called **Holytree Stone powder**.

"It's the powder of the Holytree Stone—known more popularly outside the forest as the Philosopher's Stone, I believe."

The Philosopher's Stone?!

"It's often given to pregnant women before they give birth, but its most common use is to augment the effect of magic," Lua explained.

For some reason, this seemed to spark a strange competitiveness in Aialize, who gave some information of her own.

"The World Tree only produces one or two small stones a year, which means it's very valuable, you know! So don't spill it, all right?"

So it was harvested from the World Tree...?

Now it just sounded like it was the tree's waste matter or something.

Out of curiosity, I searched my Storage, but sadly I didn't find either Holytree Stones or Philosopher's Stones among my spoils.

I sprinkled the blue powder into my mouth, then I swallowed it with the water Lua gave me.

It didn't taste like anything. I concentrated, trying to feel the powder moving down my throat, and got the "Magic Perception" skill. The powder was producing magic power, if only a little.

"Now, first we should warm up. Watch and imitate my movements, all right?"

I kept an eye on Aialize's moves and copied her. It was a pretty intense series of exercises.

This movement was intended to spread the powder through the body. I could feel it as the Holytree Stone particles dissolved in my stomach, entered my bloodstream, and spread throughout my body.

It sort of reminded me of taking barium for a stomach X-ray.

"Next, send magic power coursing through your body."

Obediently, I sent a stream of magic throughout my body. It felt a bit like using "Self-Healing." As it traveled, I felt it being absorbed by the particles in my bloodstream.

If I wasn't careful, the magic would flow into the Yuriha fibers of my training clothes, so I had to make sure I didn't use too much.

"You're quite good at this."

"Indeed. Most struggle with either circulating the magic properly or letting it seep into the magic clothing, but you seem to be a natural."

Thanks for the praise and all, but how long am I supposed to keep this up?

Regulating this was actually fairly difficult, so I couldn't talk at the same time.

Once the particles in my bloodstream had absorbed a certain amount of magic, they began to release it instead. This felt a bit like the holy light that Holy Swords emitted.

"Okay, now catch the magic as it tries to leave your body and sort of pin it

down. Then just wrap it around you like you're making a thin film over the surface of your body."

As was often the case with such prodigies, Aialize had a hard time explaining things clearly. Still, I more or less understood.

First, I used the same method with which I'd grabbed the Undead King Zen's shadow whips to hold the magic in place. Then, I spread that magic thinly around myself. Since Hayato the Hero had taught me how to use "Magic Power Armor" before, this was relatively easy.

> Skill Acquired: "Spirit Light Control"

> Skill Acquired: "Magic Control"

"All right, it worked."

"What?! Wow, it really did. I can't see your spirit light at all now."

Lua closed her eyes, then opened them again with "Spirit Vision" activated so that they turned silver, allowing her to confirm my statement. Unfortunately, I still wasn't able to see spirit light myself, so I would just have to take her word for it.

As a bonus, though, I could see that my magic power was no longer leaking out of me at all like it used to do.

I was able to do that with "Invisibility," too, though, so the "Magic Control" skill might not be necessary. Next time I had a chance to try it out, I'd have to compare it with "Magic Manipulation."

"Very impressive. That usually takes at least a few years."

"Why, it took me over a hundred... I guess ordinary standards really don't apply to heroes," Lua muttered, looking dissatisfied. It didn't seem like my place to comfort her, so I pretended I hadn't heard anything.

I turned to face them so I could thank them for their help, but it seemed that was premature.

"Next, let's begin the second round of training."

"Good idea. Since we've already used valuable Holytree Stone powder, we

might as well move on to the next course while it's still in effect."

"Right. This time, with the magic still forming a membrane around you, try to focus on the section just before your eyes, and then you should be able to look through it."

Manipulating only a part of it? That sounded pretty difficult.

I managed to do it by imagining the magic like contact lenses.

"Now, look at the ends of my fingertips...■■■■■■■■■■ **Water Spirit Summoning Sui Seirei Shoukan!**"

Aialize held up her hands, and water began to flow from them. Before long, the water formed into spheres and floated above her palms.

The breeze carried a few particles of the water on the air like mist, forming a small rainbow above Miss Aialize.

She looked like a fairy or a goddess.

"Watch carefully, Satou."

"R-right."

I was so busy admiring her that I got distracted.

Aialize wore a serious, dignified expression that made her look like a different person entirely.

I cleared my throat to cover up my distraction, then looked closer at the orbs of water.

Closer.

And even closer.

It still just looked like water to me— No, wait, I could see a little bit of shifting blue light within it. It didn't work when I focused too hard, but when I looked away, I could see it out of the corner of my eye.

> Skill Acquired: "Spirit Vision"

That was surprisingly easy to acquire. Maybe I had the Philosopher's Stone to thank for that.

“I see it.”

““What?!”” both elves exclaimed.

Is it really that surprising?

“Really?”

“I believe so. It’s a kind of amorphous light-blue glow, correct?”

“Y-yes, that’s right.”

“Incredible. Why, only one elf in a hundred can acquire that if not born with it.”

One in a hundred didn’t sound *that* rare.

“All right, round three, then! Let’s try Spirit Magic next!”

Getting a little excited now, Miss Aialize pumped her fists in the air.

A true gentleman would probably offer to dry her clothes with the Everyday Magic spell Dry, but I wanted to enjoy this sight for just a little bit longer.

Shrine maiden clothing looked pretty nice when it was wet.

“Here I go! ...■ **Wind Kaze!**”

First, Miss Aialize demonstrated for me.

With my newly acquired and activated “Spirit Vision” skill, I was able to see exactly what she was doing.

With only a one-word invocation, the colorless spirits around her gathered, turned into green wind spirits, and created the phenomenon of “wind.” In other words, they made magic.

It was about as powerful as the Wind Magic spell Air Hammer but with an incredibly short casting time.

“See?” Aialize said. “The magic it creates is no different from ordinary Wind Magic, but it has the advantages of short casting time and minimal required magic power.”

“Though you must be careful, as it will not be effective in an area without spirits,” Lua added, since Aialize seemed to have forgotten this important

warning.

They explained that there weren't many spirits in man-made buildings, monster dwellings, and so on.

With my "Spirit Vision" skill activated, Miss Aialize appeared to be projecting a beautiful spectrum of metallic colors, mostly gold.

Lua had a subtle flickering aura with lights that took on an array of cooler shades.

As far as I could tell from looking at the two of them, spirit lights tended to include a whole spectrum of hues within a certain range, not just a single color. I saw some birds flying overhead, too, but their lights were too weak to tell what they looked like.

The faint light from my body was pale white.

Curious, I released the spirit light I'd been suppressing, and an intense range of colors dyed my vision so brightly it was almost blinding. The spirits floating around the waterfall gathered around me at an alarming speed. It was hard to tell, since they were blocking my view now, but my spirit light seemed to run the full range of primary colors, all highly saturated.

Mia had said mine was "pretty," but aesthetically speaking, I thought Miss Aialize's light was far more elegant and beautiful.

Uh-oh, I can't really see anything around me like this.

I hurriedly suppressed my spirit light again so that it wouldn't show. Once their target was gone, the spirits scattered aimlessly. Most of them went back off into the environment, aside from those attracted by Lua's and Aialize's spirit lights. This all happened at a much more relaxed speed than their initial gathering.

"Goodness, such free rein you have already. He's quite adaptable, isn't he, Lady Aaze?"

"I-indeed," Miss Aialize answered vaguely. She seemed dazed, still blinking the afterimage of my spirit light from her eyes.

"My apologies, Lady Aialize. I wanted to try something, so I loosened my

control a tad too much.”

“I-it’s all right, since it’s your first time and all.”

Huh? Aialize was getting shy again. She’d been looking at me directly and talking just fine not too long ago, but now she was fidgeting and getting shifty again. Maybe my spirit light was too dazzling.

“A-at any rate, give it a try!”

“All right... ♦ **Wind Kaze!**”

Hmm? I messed up the chant, but it still produced a little breeze. Maybe the spirits were being nice to me?

“Oh? Are chants perhaps not your strong suit?”

“I’m afraid I can never seem to get them right.”

“And yet, the wind still appeared to blow just now, did it not?”

“Maybe the spirits were simply being generous,” I offered.

“Impossible.” Lua shook her head, dismissing my suggestion. “Aside from a few exceptions, like dryads, spirits do not have egos or intelligence. They are simply mechanisms that take mana from sources and relay it to creatures that need it.”

So spirits were just a kind of natural phenomenon, huh?

That was fine and all, but it was a shame that I wouldn’t get to meet any sexy undines or anything.

“You think so? Sometimes when a lot of them gather, they seem to be saying something.”

Ooh, a dissenting opinion from Miss Aialize.

“Lady Aaze, you are the only person who has ever made such a claim. The other high elves all refuse to back you up, don’t they?”

“Well, yeah...but still! It really does seem like they’re talking.”

Aialize puffed up her cheeks and turned away from Lua in a pout—a truly Mia-like reaction.

It was very possible that she was imagining it, of course, but you couldn't just make assumptions like that. Generally, when someone reported a bug that got dismissed as "just their imagination," it ended up getting found once the game was released to the public.

"Is it all right if I try it?"

"Oh, not you, too, Mr. Satou..."

"Please do! You'll hear it for sure!"

With permission granted, I decided to give it a shot.

First, I reactivated my spirit light and waited for the dazzling effect to fade and the aggressive incoming tide of spirits to calm. Within about ten minutes, spirits surrounded me like a cocoon. Looking closely, I saw that they weren't actually stopped in midair, just moving around slowly within a certain range.

Hmm. I don't really hear anything.

Maybe Miss Aialize was mistaken after all?

But then I felt a tiny amount of mana flowing out of them.

Was this some kind of deliberate signal?

As soon as the realization occurred to me, I felt something click into place, and I began to hear a teeny, tiny murmuring.

They definitely seemed to be attempting to convey something, but unfortunately I had no idea what. It was like trying to pick out specific voices from a crowd three hundred feet away. I didn't acquire any skills, either, so maybe there was some condition for being able to hear the spirits' voices.

"They did seem to be saying something, but I couldn't tell what."

"Exactly! Oh, how I would love to speak with them, even just once."

"You're sure you're not joking, Mr. Satou?"

Lua looked bewildered, but I assured her it was the truth.

Unfortunately, no matter how many times I tried, I just couldn't make Spirit Magic work.

As I'd feared, the chants went just as poorly as they did when I tried to cast any other magic.

At one point, Aialize got carried away trying to demonstrate and ended up soaking both Lua and me with water, but I got the "Spirit Magic" skill in the process, so I couldn't complain. Besides, Aialize's pouting when Lua got mad at her was very cute.

"What a shame. If you could only chant properly, you could probably even summon and employ pseudo-spirits as well as using Spirit Magic."

As an example, Lua summoned the pigeon-shaped pseudo-spirit she used to contact people from a distance.

It looked exactly like a real pigeon, except that it was covered in phosphorescent white light.

Though she called it "summoning," it was really just using small spirits as material to create the creature.

Pseudo-spirits didn't experience pain or fear, so they were convenient for battle training, hunting decoys, and so on.

When their HP reached zero, they would disappear, turning back into the spirits they were made of and scattering.

"It's easy to summon them around you or Lady Aaze because your spirit light is so intense," Lua added.

"By the way, how exactly do the varying strengths of these 'spirit lights' work?"

"Who knows?"

"Oh, Lady Aaze."

Aialize put a finger to her chin and tilted her head innocently. Groaning, Lua explained instead.

"In the case of underground veins and such, areas with stronger flow will have a brighter light. The vicinity of a mana source shines especially brightly."

Then she hesitated, as if the rest was harder to say.

“But for people, it appears to be more complex than just the amount of magic power, so we don’t actually know what causes it.”

So there were things that even the long-lived elves didn’t understand.

From what I’d learned so far on my journey, a source was where magic power came from, and spirits were intermediaries that turned mana into magic.

Spirit light probably appeared in places with a dense amount of magic power and mana.

I figured it might work in a similar way to how electromagnetic waves appeared around an electric current.

So that explained spirit lights for now, but...

“What exactly is a source?”

“An opening where mana spills from an underground vein, perhaps?”

“Indeed. On this continent, the Valley of Dragons is by far the most extraordinary, but there are over a hundred other notable spots as well.”

So the Valley of Dragons was special. That made sense, since it was the territory of the dragon god, the strongest god of all.

Then it was probably safe to assume that my spirit light was so unusual because of that source.

The fact that I was the controller of that source might also explain why I had abnormally fast magic power recovery, why my magic was so much stronger than anyone else’s, and so on.

But since my level and stats were also way higher than the average person’s, I guess I couldn’t blame it all on the source.

“That’s right. In fact...”

Aialize suddenly clapped her hands together, as if Lua’s explanation had reminded her of something.

“...I believe the bottom of this very waterfall is also a spirit pool—a kind of source!”

At that, I automatically glanced down. When I activated my “Spirit Vision,” I

did see light glowing from the bottom of the falls.

But although the water was clear, the light didn't seem very strong.

"Is this one of those hundred notable spots?"

"No, no. Those are the kinds that are big enough to build a city or town over."
Lua shook her head.

"The size of a source can vary immensely. As far as small ones like this, it's difficult to count just how many there might be."

So small sources were surprisingly common.

Curious, I looked over at the World Tree with my "Spirit Vision."

The tree itself was dazzlingly bright. When I stared long enough, I could see concentric rings of light spreading from the trunk like ripples, too.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Noticing my gaze, Miss Aialize commented with a gentle smile.

"Yes, very. So is the World Tree a source, too?"

"No, not exactly—"

"Lady Aaze..."

"Instead of an underground vein, it comes from the— Ah, am I not supposed to tell him this?"

"Well, I suppose it's all right if it's Mr. Satou, but please don't share this knowledge with anyone else."

I nodded. With Lua's approval, Aialize finished her explanation.

"Do you know about the aether that flows through the void?"

"Please forgive my ignorance."

I didn't even know what the "void" was.

Considering how far up the World Tree seemed to go, I wouldn't be surprised if it was the void of space or something, but I was hoping it would be a more fantastical answer, like "the spirit world" or something.

“I’m glad for the chance to teach you, then. The aether is...”

Looking rather pleased with herself, Miss Aialize explained the aether in an uncharacteristically eloquent way.

To summarize the explanation, which included the discussion of a “fifth element” aside from earth, water, fire, and wind: The basic idea was that the “aether” was a substance in outer space that mediated the large amount of mana that the sun produced.

“...Now, the World Tree stretches out thin threadlike limbs called ‘emerald branches’ to the aether to absorb its mana. Then it sends that mana deep into the earth, where it flows through the underground veins and keeps them active.”

Aialize spread her arms wide and looked up at the World Tree, smiling like a mother gazing at her beloved child.

The expression reminded me distinctly that Aialize was a lot older than I was.

“The light of the World Tree is the spirits picking up the mana that escapes as it flows from the sky to the earth.”

I see.

So the World Tree was essentially an enormous magic tool that kept the world going.

“If greedier folk were to learn of this, other nations would start to target forests like Bolenan that contain World Trees, which is why we keep it a secret.”

Right. They were sort of like giant power plants.

If someone were to monopolize them, they could probably even rule the world.

“I promise never to speak of this to anyone. If my word is not enough, I will gladly be bound by Geis or ‘Contract.’”

“Oh, that’s hardly necessary.”

It seemed like a pretty important secret to me, but Lua chuckled as if I were exaggerating.

I was serious, though... Elves might be a little too trusting.

When I ventured to voice this concern to Lua, she responded:

“I do not think the worst is very likely. If someone truly did attempt to control the World Trees and destroy the world, the gods would punish them.”

Oh right, I guess gods really do exist in this world.

Still, I would be careful not to mention this to anyone else.

I carved that resolution into my heart.

Fairy Games

Satou here. Ever since I became a working adult, the days off on my calendar have dramatically decreased. In exchange, though, I've gotten that much better at enjoying those breaks to the fullest once a game is finished.

"Yeaaah! I got a Herculeees!"

Arisa's excited cry echoed through the verdant forest, still damp with morning mist.

Today, we were going hunting with the elves. We got to the meeting place early, though, so the elves hadn't arrived yet.

Arisa and Lulu normally didn't participate in this kind of thing, but they'd heard that the scenery near the hunting grounds was beautiful, so they came along to check it out.

I had Practical Magic spells like Magic Hand and Enchant: Physical Protection at the ready, so I should be able to protect them even if any unforeseen circumstances arose.

The latter was particularly convenient, since it meant we could walk through the forest in light clothing without getting rashes from sap or having our legs cut up by thorns and such.

In theory, this might even make the legendary chain-mail bikini a possibility, but I decided not to mention this idea lest my companions stare daggers at me.

So today the girls were all dressed in matching safari expedition outfits.

More importantly, what in the world was Arisa doing?

Coming down from a treetop using the Space Magic spell Short-Range Teleportation, Arisa presented me with a beetle that was easily a foot long. She hated spiders, but for whatever reason, giant beetles were fine.

On closer inspection, I realized it did resemble a Hercules beetle. The AR display called it a **Bolenan Spearhorn Beetle**.

Lulu and Nana, who were picking honeywort with me, looked up at Arisa, but when they realized it was a bug she was holding, they lost interest and went back to harvesting wild plants.

“What do you think? Pretty amazing, right?”

Before I could scold her for behaving like a grade school boy, Pochi and Tama showered Arisa with praise.

“Huuuge!”

“It’s amazing, sir! Pochi wants to find one, too, sir!”

Getting weirdly fired up about it, Tama and Pochi immediately started climbing nearby trees as well.

I’d seen Tama napping in tree branches all the time, but I had never seen Pochi climb a tree before.

“Gotchaaa?”

Tama did a spin in midair before landing on the ground to show off a stag beetle of comparable size to Arisa’s.

“A cat doing a twirl in midair... Maybe I should start calling you Nyanko-sensei?” Arisa murmured gravely. This must be some weird joke from the Showa era.

“Grrr, Tama’s so fast, sir!”

Pochi looked around in the treetops, anxious to catch up. Then she spotted something and leaped to another branch, sticking her head into a hole in the tree.

Judging by the rapid movement of her tail, she must have spotted some prey.

“I have you now, sir!”

Pochi popped back out of the hole and promptly went flying right off the branch.

“Waaah—sir?”

As she screamed, I used Magic Hand to catch her in midair and scoop her into my arms.

“Be careful, all right?”

“Sorry, sir.”

Pochi slumped down, her ears flattening.

“What did you catch, Pochi?”

Arisa’s thoughtful question perked her dog ears right back up.

“This, sir!”

“Geh! Th-that sure is something...” Arisa backed away slowly.

Just then, the elves arrived, along with Liza in the lead and Mia bringing up the rear.

“Delicacy.”

“Gift.”

“It’s quite unusual to catch these at this time of year. I’m told humans don’t often eat them, but they’re delicious if you steam them before cooking. Scooping out the sticky insides with a spoon is the best part.”

Seeing the prey Pochi had caught, the elves all gave their approval.

I wasn’t expecting to hear that about a puppy-size caterpillar, that was for sure.

So they even eat this...? I guess you learn a thing or two when you live that long.

At any rate, now that the elves had arrived, we could get started on the hunt.

“Meow, meeeooooow!”

“Awoooooooo, sir!”

This time, it was Tama’s and Pochi’s shouts that echoed through the trees.

They were using the low-hanging ivy to swing from branch to branch, Tarzan-style.

“Master, it is my turn next, I report.”

Nana grabbed a piece of ivy and stared at me expressionlessly.

Though most people wouldn't be able to tell the difference, to me it looked like she was just as excited as Tama and Pochi.

“U-um, I think I'd like you to carry me instead, ma—”

Arisa didn't want to swing on the ivy, so she was strapped to the back of Nana, who was using the Foundation technique Body Strengthening.

Before she could finish her protest, however, Nana impatiently took off.

“—Aaaaaaaaaah!”

Arisa's scream shook the dew off the surrounding trees.

“M-master...”

Watching her sister shriek on Nana's back, Lulu turned pale and trembled.

“Don't worry. I can just lift you with magic and carry you across.”

I lifted Lulu a bit with Magic Hand, then picked her up like a child and floated in the air with “Skyrunning.”

“Waaah! Th-this is so sudden...”

Lulu's face turned from pale to bright red.

She'd been getting more accustomed to being close to me, I thought, but I guess she still couldn't deal with unexpected situations like this.

In that way, she was similar to her older sister, Arisa.

“Mrrr. Satou.”

“Mia, I'll carry you on the way back. Liza, could you take her for now?”

“Yes, master.”

With a wave to Mia and Liza, I took off after the elves and the rest of our party.

“Kyaaa!”

After the initial jump came a head rush like a sudden drop on a roller coaster,

followed by an abrupt change in speed and wind pressure that sent my hair and clothes flying back. The experience was exhilarating.

Unfortunately, Lulu didn't seem to be enjoying it as much. She was obviously stifling a scream as she clung to me for dear life.

Something about the sight made me want to pretend to let my hand slip and scare her even more, but I couldn't betray Lulu's trust just to satisfy my childish urges, of course.

I held her securely as I jumped from tree to tree, and soon we reached a break in the forest.

"Ahhh, praise be to solid ground!"

Arisa was practically kissing the grass by the time we arrived.

Tama, Pochi, and Nana, on the other hand, were aglow with smiles from the fun ride. I would have to make sure they didn't get so overexcited that they slipped up.

"Are you all right, Lulu?"

She was still clinging to me, even though we'd reached the ground.

Since she was pressed so close to me, I could feel her heart racing.

That must have been very scary for her.

"Y-yes. My heart is still pounding a little, but I'm f-fine. L-let's just stay like this a bit longer, please..."

Lulu's face was buried in my shoulder, so I couldn't see her expression. I could feel her fingers trembling as she clung to me, though, so I let her keep hanging on to me for now.

"Oh-ho-hooo? What's this, now?"

As she peered up at Lulu from the ground, a slow smirk spread across Arisa's face, and she started smacking Lulu on the back.



“Oh, dear sister? Are you sure it’s because of fear that your heart’s pounding? Hmm?” she whispered in a voice I could barely pick up with my “Keen Hearing” skill.

“A-Arisa, stoppp!”

Turning bright red, Lulu shot away from me like a magnet with the same polarity, tackling Arisa and covering her mouth with a slender hand. I was just glad that their sisterly bond was as strong as ever. It was cute to see Lulu panic, too.

“Geeeh!”

Arisa seemed to be having a bit of trouble breathing, but she could get away with using a chant-less Short-Range Teleportation if she really needed to, so I decided to let them go at it for now.

“Satou.”

Turning around, I saw Mia beckoning me from Liza’s back.

So the last pair had arrived, too. Mia looked surprisingly calm; I guess she was accustomed to being carried.

The area we were visiting was a plateau next to a clear lake.

Flowers bloomed along the shore of the lake, and countless varieties of butterflies danced through the air, their wings rivaling the flowers in beauty.

On the plateau, several herds of buffalo munched on grass, adding to the peaceful atmosphere.

“Pretty butterfliies?”

Tama bent forward like a real cat, wiggling her butt a few times before pouncing at the insects.

She swatted at the butterflies with her hands, but she was careful not to actually touch them and hurt their wings, so I decided not to scold her.

Usually, Pochi would be right at Tama’s heels, but today she was hanging back, looking reluctant.

“You’re not going to join her, Pochi?”

"I can't, sir. If I get too close to the flowers, I won't be able to smell prey anymore, sir."

Oh right. I suppose the main goal of the day is hunting.

"Safe."

"Break."

A few of the elves muttered single words.

As usual, it was difficult to understand this taciturn variety of elf.

"Guya, Gia, you must speak properly today and say what you mean. These kind people haven't lived with you long enough to understand you, remember?"

"Explain."

"Trust."

One of the better-spoken elf boys told the pair off, but they didn't seem to want to bother explaining themselves, so they left it to him.

This elf who actually spoke in complete sentences was named Hishirotoya, Hiya for short.

"Oh, all right, then..."

Hiya gave a resigned shrug.

"This is a safe area. There are no poisonous creatures here and nothing dangerous in the lake, either."

I searched my map to be safe, but just as he said, there weren't any dangerous or aggressive creatures here.

There was one thing that caught my eye, however.

I pointed to a tree in the middle of the lake that had lost its leaves.

"What about that Elder Treant?"

"Oh, that's nothing to worry about. I'm impressed that you recognized it, though. Most people would assume that was just a tree... But they don't tend to move much, so you've nothing to fear."

There were a few knots and hollows in the center of the trunk that might look like an old man's face from the right angle.

"Whoa!"

"Look at that!"

My comrades, who hadn't noticed the treant, all exclaimed in surprise.

"Won't we anger it if we light a fire on the shore here?"

"No, that's fine. If you were to, say, pour oil into the lake and set fire to it, of course it'd get angry, but noticing a little campfire on the shore would be too much effort for it."

For the most part, he explained, treants didn't live much differently than ordinary trees.

I would be interested in talking to one at least once, but Hiya told me that they took even longer to converse than giants.

Now that my concerns were assuaged, I picked up my bow and quiver from the ground and nodded to the elves.

"Let's go, then—"

"Wait."

"Water Stone."

The two single-word elves stopped me and headed over to the shore.

"...■ **Call Water Sui Yobi.**"

One of them, Miss Gia, used a short incantation that sounded like Spirit Magic. The surface of the lake rippled, and a small lump that glowed blue floated up from the surface. According to the AR, it was called a **Water Stone**.

Looking at it with "Spirit Vision," I could see that water spirits were wrapped around the Water Stone, carrying it toward the shore.

"Need."

"Dismantling."

Miss Gia picked up the Water Stone when it arrived, flowed magic into us, and

showed us how it produced water. She seemed to mean that they used it for butchering prey.

“All right—we’ll be back.”

“Make sure you bring home a big one, ’kay? Whoever nets the biggest catch wins a flower crown and a kiss from the adorable Arisa!”

Arisa struck a strange pose from the little camp they’d set up near the flower garden.

I didn’t say it out loud, but I was pretty sure the “sassy pirate” pose worked only if you had a shapely figure. Arisa’s jokes were always so out-of-date.

“It’s a little chilly around here, so I’ll prepare some nice warm soup, too.”

“Master, I shall make garlands for your exclusive use, I vow.”

What am I supposed to do with garlands? Throw a grand opening for a store?

Again, I kept my comments to myself, since Nana seemed to have taken a liking to the flowers. Instead, I let her stay behind with Lulu and Arisa.

Mia, the beastfolk girls, and I all followed the elves away from the camp.

“Master, that is a fine herd of horned buffalo.”

“Lots of beeeef?”

“I couldn’t eat all that, sir.”

The beastfolk girls were staring at a herd of Great Bolenan Buffalo, their eyes gleaming. The buffalo, which looked more or less like American bison, were munching away at the grass on the plateau.

They were about three hundred feet away, just barely within the range of a short bow.

One of the elves put up a sound barrier with Wind Magic so the herd wouldn’t hear us talking strategy.

“Thin out.”

“Ten.”

I didn’t understand what the short-spoken elves were getting at, so I turned

to one of the more loquacious elves for an explanation.

“This area is particularly scarce on carnivorous predators, even for the Bolenan Forest. Without any natural enemies, the buffalo population can grow too large and consume all the vegetation if left to their own devices. Thus, our hunting goal today is to thin out the population to a certain amount. We will startle the herd into fleeing and cull ten of the slower buffalo.”

I see. That’s a lot of information to narrow down to three words.

These elves were awfully deep.

“Mia!”

Just as we’d determined the number of our prey and were about to start the hunt, a familiar-looking elf boy ran up to us.

If I remembered right, this was Mia’s childhood friend Goya. I felt bad, but his name just made me want some goya melon stir-fry. There was a really good place for it near my work...

“Goya?”

The boy nodded and showed Mia his bow, then he glared at me and declared, “Contest!”

I wished he’d learn from the sentence-using elves a bit more.

“Erm, are you saying you want to have a hunting competition with me?”

“Yeah.”

Could you not look at me like I’m the idiot here, please?

Most people can’t understand everything you mean if you only say a single word, you know.

“How will we decide who wins?”

“Size.”

Hmm. The boss of the herd would be the biggest, of course, but that would detract from the purpose of today’s hunt.

My best bet would be to aim for the biggest of the ten who lagged farthest

behind, then.

“All right. You got it.”

“Let’s go, then. Guya, you use Guiding Wind on everyone’s bows; Gia, you use Noise to scare the herd.”

“Mm.”

“Uh-huh.”

“No Guiding.”

“Does that mean you don’t want hit correction magic on your and Mr. Satou’s bows, Goya?”

“Mm. Right.”

The longer-spoken elf looked to me uncertainly, so I nodded to let her know that was all right.

Even if Goya missed, Mia, the sentence-using elf, and I could take his prey down.

At only 130 years old, Mia was already an excellent shot, so I was sure the sentence-using elf with over a millennium of experience could hit a buffalo with ease.

I gave a simple explanation of the strategy to the beastfolk girls, warning them not to be surprised by the loud noise the magic would produce.

Since they were planning to attack the buffalo directly, they’d changed from their safari outfits into whale leather armor.

“Start. ■■...”

Guya began his chant, followed shortly by Miss Gia.

Mia and I nocked arrows to our short bows.

Goya and the other elves were using longbows. All of the elves’ bows, including Mia’s, were elegant in design with decorative carvings and strings.

According to the AR display, they were all elf-made fairy bows with various perks like improved accuracy and range.

I was using a short hunting bow I'd made myself, not the magic bow I got in the giants' village. It didn't have any special effects, but that was hardly necessary for a distance of around three hundred feet.

“...■ **Guiding Wind** *Michibiki no Kaze.*”

When Guya's spell was complete, a breeze started up around Mia and the long-spoken elf, flowing toward the herd.

“...Now!”

“...■■■■ **Noise** *Souon.*”

On the signal of the verbose elf, Miss Gia's magic created an explosive sound that reverberated across the plateau.

The startled buffalo reared back and began to flee, with their leader at the front of the herd.

“Let's go, you two.”

“Tallyhooo!”

“Pochi is on the move, sir!”

The beastfolk girls darted out of the bushes, fast enough to put a rabbit to shame.

Their role was not to chase the buffalo but to finish off any that survived a shot from our arrows.

Pochi zipped along at the front of the pack. At one point, she stumbled and did a little somersault, but she carried right on running without letting it slow her down. Her recovery abilities were pretty impressive.

“Fast.”

“Agile.”

The elves who had cast their spells praised the beastfolk girls as they drew arrows from their quivers.

As I was watching the beastfolk girls out of the corner of my eye, the other elves fired their first arrows.

That was all well and good, but Goya was putting a bit too much power into his shots. He would probably hit his target, but I figured it would just injure the mark without killing it.

I predicted the path of one buffalo that none of the elves had targeted and fired just ahead of it. At this distance, I had to worry about the direction of the wind but not the density of the air or the temperature or any of that. Piece of cake, really.

I shot four more arrows after that and then checked to see if any of the others had missed their targets.

“Mrrr.”

“Skilled.”

The two spell-casting elves had nocked arrows to their bows, but they lowered their weapons now without shooting.

They could probably read the trajectory of the arrows.

Checking on the AR display, I saw that a few of the targeted buffalo had survived, but the speedy beastfolk girls quickly finished them off by slitting their throats with daggers or short swords. It might sound cruel, but this was kinder than letting them suffer and die slowly, not to mention being better for the taste of the meat.

“Pochi!”

“Waaah, sir!”

A buffalo that Mia had seemingly finished off stood up and charged at Pochi with its horns.

The lightweight Pochi was tossed into the air like a ball.

Instinctively, I rushed out of the bushes, but partway there, I noticed on the AR that Pochi was unharmed. I’d crafted that armor with battling demons in mind, so of course a buffalo’s horn wouldn’t be able to pierce it.

Relieved, I nonetheless sent out a Magic Hand to secretly cushion Pochi’s fall.

“It’s maaad?”

Tama had straddled the bull's neck and was hanging on to its horns like a rodeo star.

I hopped on behind her to try and keep her from getting hurt.

"Masterrr?"

"I'll support you, so finish it off, okay?"

This was way harder than one of those mechanical bulls. I thought I was going to bite my tongue.

"Aye-aye, siiir."

I grabbed the buffalo's horn and yanked its head back, using Magic Hand to keep Tama securely in place.

Right away, Tama leaned forward smoothly and drew her dagger along the bull's throat.

"Rest in peeeace?"

I grabbed the praying Tama and jumped off the bull to prevent any injuries to us as it fell.

I probably would've been fine, but any normal human would have more than a few broken bones if they got crushed under a one-ton buffalo.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, sir."

Liza helped Pochi up, confirming that she was unharmed.

The elves arrived shortly thereafter.

"Fast."

"Magic?"

I'd refrained from using "Warp," but I had still run pretty close to my top speed out of concern for Pochi, so the elves were a little surprised.

The long-spoken elf was checking on the prey with narrowed eyes but then faced me with a smile.

"Very impressive, Mr. Satou. It's rare to see anyone with such skills, even

among us elves.”

“No magic.”

Mia latched onto my arm and made a victory sign.

“Indeed. I’ve never seen anyone shoot so quickly and accurately without any magical assistance.”

Mia nuzzled my arm triumphantly, evidently pleased with the sentence-using elf’s praise.

> Title Acquired: Bow Master

Oh dear. I got a new bow-related title.

“Next time...”

Hearing a dark mutter, I turned around to see Goya with tears in his eyes.

Considering his resemblance to a middle school kid, I felt kind of bad for upsetting him so badly.

“Won’t lose next time!”

With that shout, he ran away without waiting to confirm the results of the match.

“Awww.”

“Youth.”

The short-spoken elves watched him go rather fondly.

Overall, I had taken down six buffalo, the long-spoken elf three, and Mia one. Goya hadn’t finished off any buffalo, which must have been why he didn’t need to wait to find out who won.

The reason I’d finished off six when I only fired five arrows was that one of my shots went straight through one buffalo and pierced a second one.

But the huntsman who brought down the biggest buffalo turned out to be Mia.

Since boys usually wanted to seem cool to the object of their affections, perhaps the reason Goya ran off crying was because he’d lost to Mia, not me.

“Let’s drain the blood, shall we? Lift the buffalo, please.”

“Right.”

“Okay.”

One of the short-spoken elves used the Earth Magic spell Lift to put some of the buffalo bodies on an incline, assisting in the blood draining.

The other one used Plant Manipulation to use weeds and grass to lift the buffalo.

Using magic for this task was a very elf-like thing to do indeed.

Once the buffalo had been bled out, the beastfolk girls made impressively short work of butchering the bodies.

The elves initially intended to bury everything except the best quality meat and some of the entrails, but at the beastfolk girls’ strong insistence that this would be a waste, they ended up bringing back everything edible.

The meat was transported using an elf-made Magic Bag, which seemed to be a contrivance similar to the Garage Bag.

The maker was a friend of the long-spoken elf, so I was able to request Magic Bags to be made for each of my kids during the course of our stay.



“Cuuute.”

“They’re very, very cute, sir.”

When we got back to the rest of the group, we were greeted by a band of flower fairies.

Arisa, Lulu, and Nana wore flower crowns on their heads and had even braided flowers into their hair.

“Hee-hee! Pretty good, right?”

“Master, I would like your evaluation and praise, I entreat.”

“Yes, you look very cute. I thought you were flower fairies.”

Arisa and Nana posed for praise, so I complimented them accordingly.

“Let me see yours, too, Lulu.”

“A-all right...”

“Those flowers look very nice with your lovely black hair.”

Lulu ducked her head bashfully, so I tilted up her chin.

She looked very cute, so it would be a shame if everyone couldn't see.

“Tama's a flower fairy, toooo?”

“Pochi too, sir.”

The two young beastfolk girls looked thrilled with the flowers Arisa gave them.



Darn. I should have put them all in fairy cosplay today instead of safari outfits.

“Look at thiiiis?”

Tama gleefully pointed at her ears.

Since her hair was too short for braids, Arisa had stuck a large flower next to each of her ears.

“Arisa, I do not think that flowers suit me very well...”

“Compliment.”

“You all look adorable.”

Liza and Mia had very sharply contrasting attitudes, but I praised them both anyway.

Contrary to Liza’s claims, she looked like a cute flower princess.

All that being said, I didn’t think it was necessary to put flowers on me, too.

But Arisa and Lulu seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely, so I didn’t have the heart to stop them.

“Looks goooood?”

“Beautiful ever after, sir.”

Tama and Pochi pranced around me excitedly.

I didn’t want to burst Pochi’s bubble by pointing out her strange turn of phrase, so I simply sat and played the role of their dress-up doll for the better part of an hour.

“Bizarre.”

“Mystery.”

Once I was done being a doll and started preparing for lunch, the short-spoken elves came over to marvel at my cauldron.

Is it really that strange?

“I imagine this was made with a spell like Magic Mold, yes? This normal cauldron is one thing, but the sealed one is very intriguing.”

The long-spoken elf stared at the cauldron in which I was boiling the sinewy meat.

“Wow, you can adjust the temperature of this heat source freely, too?”

The transparent cauldron floating in the air was indeed made with Magic Mold, so it could be sealed so perfectly that it essentially functioned as a pressure cooker.

I had a second cauldron out, too, which I was using to cook rice.

“But normally using it like this would cause it to collapse.”

“Special,” Mia boasted, proudly watching the sentence-using elf’s stunned reaction.

If this were a manga, there would probably be little puffs of air coming out of Mia’s nose.

“M-master, the tree!”

Lulu, who was washing the vegetables in the lake, called out to me anxiously.

“My, it’s unusual to see a treant move.”

Just as the long-spoken elf said, it was the approach of the treant that had startled Lulu so.

“Hallooo!”

The treant stretched out one of its withered, branch-like arms. Standing in its palm was a green-skinned little girl—a dryad.

“Mia, Formation D!”

“Mm. Careful.”

Arisa and Mia jumped in front of me with their arms outstretched, evidently guarding me from the cheerfully waving dryad.

When had they come up with these “formations” anyway?

“Oh dear. The little ones don’t like me, eh?”

The dryad looked a bit sorrowful at their reaction.

“What brings you here, dryad?” the long-spoken elf asked.

“The treants said they had business with the human, so I came to interpret. Unlike elves, humans’ lives aren’t long enough to have a conversation with a treant.”

She went on to explain that the treants had reacted to the wave of excess magic that was produced when I used spells.

Now that I’d learned “Magic Control,” I normally used it to prevent continuous magic leakage, but I hadn’t realized it happened when I used magic, too. I’d have to be more careful from now on.

“So what business do they have with me?”

“Well, it’s their budding season, so they want you to siphon some magic power into the lake.”

“Mrrr.”

“Labor.”

The two short-spoken elves frowned warily.

“Dryad, you know Lady Aaze is quite busy right now, do you not? And even the most magical of us elves have no power to spare from helping her. Can’t you ask the treants if they can wait at least a year?”

I didn’t know what this “budding season” was all about, but I was surprised to think it would be flexible enough to wait a whole year.

“Not the Holytree. They’re asking the human, silly!”

I didn’t mind giving them some magic, but I’d prefer not to have to kiss a little girl in the process.

“Sure. What do I do? If possible, give me a method that doesn’t involve kissing, please.”

Arisa and Mia nodded in satisfaction at my words, but the other elves turned pale.

“Reckless.”

“Suicidal?”

“M-Mr. Satou, dryads don’t know how to hold back. If you transfer magic to

them without someone like Lady Aaze or the shrine maidens around, she might well suck you dry.”

“Oh, please. This human can handle it.”

Uh, wait a second.

The dryad didn’t deny what the long-spoken elf said just now.

Thinking back on my previous experiences with her, it was entirely possible that she took more than any normal human would’ve been able to give.

“Well, putting it directly into the lake isn’t very efficient. One second, please.”

The dryad turned to the treant and fell silent for a while.

She was probably talking through some kind of plant network.

Eventually, they seemed to reach an agreement, and the treant slowly shook out its branches, dropping two twigs into the lake.

There was a loud splash—so loud that I realized that what looked like twigs were actually branches big enough to support a house.

“Use those branches to channel your magic into the lake.”

“Got it.”

The branches drifted to the shore on their own, so I picked them up.

I didn’t know whether it was the dryad or the treant who moved the branches, but it meant one less job for Mia to do with Water Magic.

“All right—here goes.”

“Do it!”

I began siphoning magical energy.

I carefully moderated the amount of power I ran through the treant’s branch so I wouldn’t break it.

“Yes! Yees!”

“Quiet, you!”

Enraged by the dryad’s rather indecent exclamations, Arisa grabbed a berry

off the ground and flung it at her.

She was never one for athletics, though, so the berry sadly missed its mark by a mile.

If you weren't used to throwing things, it was only natural that your aim wouldn't be very good.

"I was just trying to cheer him on!"

Still, at least it had the effect of stopping the dryad's shouting.

This was actually harder than I'd expected. No matter how much magic power I poured in, it felt as if most of it was escaping through the surface of the lake.

This seemed like a waste, so I divided off some of my magic to make a thin film over the lake's surface, holding the rest of it inside. That should do it.

When I'd used up around half my magic, the entire lake began to glow faintly.

"Okay, all good now."

"...Remarkable. Even Lady Aaze took around ten days to fill the lake with magic..."

Evidently, I'd overdone it a bit, but Miss Aialize and the other elf higher-ups already knew that I was unusual in various ways, so it probably didn't matter much if the rest of the elves got a glimpse of my power, too.

They didn't seem to interact with anyone outside the forest very often anyway.

"Loook?"

"The lake trees are in spring now, sir!"

New sprouts were budding from the treants who had gathered in the lake, though they'd looked like dead trees not long ago. In an instant, the buds bloomed into flowers, producing golden fruit.

So this was the "budding season" they'd mentioned.

"Here, human. A thank-you from the treants."

The dryad handed me a string of wooden beads with pine cone-like designs.

“Treespirit Pearls.”

“Useful.”

“This is a valuable item that can be used as a catalyst for Forest Magic. Even without a grasp of Forest Magic, you can simply put magic into the beads and visualize what you want, and it will help plants grow, bend or stretch wood, and so on.”

Ooh, that could be very convenient for woodworking.

“Thank you, Elder Treant!”

I was so excited that I blurted my thanks.

The dryad promptly burst out laughing, her mouth widening so much, it was practically bigger than her face.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Saying thank you for a thank-you? You’re one funny human.”

Once she’d had her fill of laughing at me, the dryad disappeared into the treant’s palm.

The treant moved back to the center of the lake, its leaves and branches rustling.

> Skill Acquired: “Horticulture”

> Title Acquired: Gardener

> Title Acquired: Friend of the Treants

> Title Acquired: Friend of the Elder Treants

> Title Acquired: Guider of Buds

Checking my log, I noticed that I’d gotten a few rather strange skills and titles.

That aside, though...

“What should I do with these branches?”

“Keep them. They’d be perfect for making wands or staffs, and there are probably magic paths in there now, since you sent enough magic through them to fill the lake.”

The long-spoken elf promised to introduce me to an expert staff maker.

We had the golden thorn that Lulu got from the black dragon, too, so that would be a perfect opportunity.

Well, that should do it.

Once this little diversion was over, the cauldrons seemed to be just about done cooking.

I put a large pot under the transparent cauldron and canceled out the magic so that the meat dropped into it. Then I added onions and boiled the lot in water, adjusting the seasoning as I went.

“Master, I’ve finished the preparations.”

“My prep work is done as well.”

Lulu and Liza brought over the vegetables and entrails they’d been prepping, so I used them to make side dishes.

Tama and Pochi got some eggs from the forest, so I decided to make omelet rice for Mia with lots of mushrooms and green peas.

“Mia, allow me to draw a heart shape, I entreat.”

“Bunny.”

“Request accepted.”

Nana stood at the ready to make a drawing in ketchup on Mia’s completed omelet rice.

“Mm, smells good. Is that what I think it is?”

“You’ll have to wait and find out.”

Arisa drew closer, inhaling the scent of soy sauce overflowing from the pot.

Beside her, the beastfolk girls were also standing at attention.

I arranged the completed rice bowls on the table that the elves magically prepared.

Then, once Arisa led the group in a chorus of “Thanks for the food!” we began to eat.

“Ahhh, delicious! It’s been too long since I had a beef bowl!”

Arisa shoveled the meat and rice into her mouth with tears in her eyes.

Usually, Lulu would be gently scolding her for her manners—but not this time. Instead, her face was as serious as Liza’s as she took delicate mouthfuls of food as quickly as she could while still maintaining a polite facade.

On top of that, she seemed to be contemplating the dish and even taking a few notes. Lulu had quite a knack for culinary research.

“Yummy, very yumyyy.”

“It’s full of deliciousness, sir!”

Tama and Pochi waved their fists triumphantly after the first bite of their extra-large beef bowl helpings.

Pochi’s tail was wagging away, too.

“It’s quite delicious.”

Liza’s voice was quiet, but her emotion was plain on her face.

“Master, it is on par with the deliciousness of hamburg steak, I report.”

“Mine too.”

Mia insisted that her omelet rice was just as good as Nana’s beef bowl.

“Oh my, what is that? It smells amazing! Whatever are you eating?”

“Beef bowls.”

Miss Aialize, who’d just teleported onto the scene, addressed one of the short-spoken elves.

Behind her was the shrine maiden Lua.

“Care to join us? There’s plenty more.”

“Thank you, Satou!”

I didn’t know what she came for, but meals were always more fun with more people, so I offered Aialize a bowl.

I’d made plenty, so having a few extra mouths to feed was no trouble.

“Ahhh, this is sooooo good!”

“Oh, Lady Aaze...” Lua shook her head. “By the way, Hiya. The dryad told me that the treants’ budding season had begun, so I came running, but...”

Mr. Hiya, the normally eloquent elf, simply pointed at the treants and their golden fruit by way of response.

Even the more talkative elves prioritized eating, it seemed.

“...What? The golden fruit has bloomed already? But that means the budding is over!”

“Satou.”

One of the short-spoken elves gestured at me.

I guess they all really liked my beef bowls.

“Did you do something, Mr. Satou?”

“The dryad asked me to supply them with magic power, that’s all. The methods you and Lady Aialize taught me on the stone stage to suppress spirit light and magic leakage proved very helpful.”

“‘That’s all,’ he says...”

Lua mumbled to herself in disbelief, so I offered her a beef bowl, too.

“Leave it to you, Satou,” Aialize remarked with a mouth full of food, resulting in a scolding from Mia.

One of the short-spoken elves next to her wiped the rice from her face with a handkerchief.

Just as Lua was starting to take a bite of her beef bowl, she caught sight of this situation and froze.

“...Ah, this is no time to be eating, Lady Aaze! If the treants’ problem is resolved, we must hurry back!”

“Wait, I’m still—”

But Lua grabbed her hand and dragged her back to the fairy ring, where both of them disappeared.

Even if you're in the middle of a death march, you should really take a break to eat once in a while...

I gazed for a moment at the fairy ring where they'd vanished, then shrugged and readjusted my attitude.

I'd better eat, too, after all.

First, of course, I had to taste the meat. Considering how short the cook time was, the meat was so soft that you barely needed to chew it.

The flavor came out great, too; the sweet sauce mingled with the umami of the meat in every bite.

In fact, the whole thing tasted so good that I was tempted to start planning a nationwide beef bowl restaurant chain.

As I half-seriously contemplated this, I took another bite, including the golden-brown onions this time.

The faint crunch and sweetness of the onion somehow balanced perfectly with the meat.

I had thought it tasted good before, but the onion stepped it up even further.

Then, finally, I took a bite with a mouthful of rice...

Delicious.

It was so perfectly delicious; there was no other way to describe it.

The meat, the onions, the rice, and the unsung hero—the sauce.

Together, they formed a beef bowl symphony that played a delicate harmony on my tongue— “The red pickled ginger isn't red!”

Arisa's shriek brought my mind back to reality just as it started to drift into another dimension.

That was close. It had been so long since I last had a beef bowl that I got a little carried away.

“If I can get some red shiso or food coloring, I'll make it red next time.”

Red shiso turns things sort of purplish-red, right?

“Exists.”

“Nea.”

“Are you saying Miss Nea has red perilla or red food coloring?”

“Mm.”

I was getting pretty good at figuring out what the short-spoken elves were saying.

I had to meet with Nea, the cook, to go over what spices I needed for curry anyway, so I could ask her about it then.

I thanked the elves for the information, then chopped up the pickled ginger for Arisa.

Specifically, into the kind of slices I’d often seen at beef bowl chains.

I popped one into my mouth to cleanse my palate, then concentrated on finishing my beef bowl.

Pickled ginger is just the thing to complete a meal like this!



“What in the hell?!”

Arisa shouted in an extremely put-on Kansai dialect.

After the hunt, we returned to the elf village and went to the public bathhouse in the underground city to rid ourselves of sweat.

But at the entrance of the bathhouse, Arisa had a bit of a breakdown when she saw the MEN and WOMEN signs.

“But I wanted to have a mixed bath with my *sho*— Oh, I know! Let’s reserve a family bath!”

“Family bath?”

“None.”

Arisa whirled around like she’d come up with a brilliant plan, but the short-spoken elves only shook their heads.

I guess we hadn’t had a big bath together since the outdoor bath I made along

the river.

In the Muno Barony and the old capital, we had only a single person-size bathtub, so we took turns using it.

“Well, shall we head in to the men’s bath?”

I called out to Hiya and Guya, the male elves of the group, and together we entered through the curtain under the MEN sign.

It was only then that I realized that male elves’ names seemed to end in “-ya,” while female elves’ names just ended in “-a.”

Ignoring Arisa’s cry of lamentation, I told the rest of the group to go into the women’s bath. The younger kids wanted to come with me, but there were other men with us today, so I hardened my heart and sent them away.

Since elves didn’t seem to wear robes for bathing, I decided to do as the Romans do and simply carried a towel with me into the bath area.

We appeared to be early, as we were the only three people in the men’s bathhouse.

“Do we use this bowl-shaped fruit as soap?”

It kind of looked like a boob, but that was probably just because I had an incurably dirty mind.

“Yes, it’s a soap fruit that Daisaku created through selective breeding. I believe he called it ‘*oppai* soap’?”

The word Hiya used was the Japanese word for *boobs*.

I guess it was Daisaku the Hero who really had a dirty mind.

What was up with that guy...?

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I followed the two elves’ invitation to wash each other’s backs. Since the elves looked so young, it reminded me of bathing with my cousins as a kid.

I couldn’t quite bring myself to use the boob soap, so I found some normal soap instead. This kind had a pleasant, milky smell.

Once I was nice and clean, I immersed myself in the bath and put the towel on

my forehead.

Ahhh, there's nothing like a nice large bath.

"Daisaku brought us many great cultural boons, but the public bathhouse is the best of all, don't you agree?"

"Good life."

The two elves seemed to agree with me.

"Baaath tiiiiime!"

"Arisa, you mustn't run in the bathhouse."

As I stretched out to enjoy the hot water, I heard Arisa's and Liza's voices from the women's side of the bathhouse.

Before long, I could hear the rest of the girls and Miss Gia the elf chattering as well.

The girls' lively giggling definitely added to the bathhouse's peaceful atmosphere.

Maybe I should make some fruit-flavored milk for everyone after the bath?

"My, human bodies are quite different from elves'."

A new, high-voiced elf had entered the men's bath and was now rather rudely squeezing my arm.

The bad behavior was putting a damper on my good mood, so I turned to the newcomer to protest.

...Huh?

Shoulder-length hair, dripping wet from the bath, undulated before my eyes.

Looking farther down, I was greeted with the sight of a barely B-size breast, as well as the rest of a young girl's body, exposed to the air for all the world to see.

I wished she had at least put a towel over her lower half.

She looked way too young for my tastes, so it wasn't like I was excited about it, but it was definitely pretty awkward.

Finally, although a little too late for my poor eyes, the steam of the bath rose

up enough to cover her delicates.

I gladly returned my gaze to her face and decided to move on to resolve the misunderstanding.

“Excuse me— isn’t this the men’s bath?”

“...Men’s bath? There’s no such distinction in the elf village, ya know.”

According to the AR display, this elf girl’s name was **Portomea**. She had a cute face, like a Western doll, but her tone was a little aggressive.

Her brazen, unabashed attitude in exposing her naked body to a strange man was similar to Mia’s, although it seemed to be a little too common in this world.

“Then why are there signs that say MEN and WOMEN in kanji at the entrance?”

“I dunno; that was part of Daisaku’s design. He said it was a ‘stylistic choice’ or whatever.”

A “stylistic choice,” huh...?

“I heard mixed baths were normal in Nihon. No?”

“Perhaps in another time, but where I come from, it’s more common to separate them.”

“Huh, that’s weird. Baths are more fun when everyone enjoys ’em together, don’cha think?”

Portomea shrugged, as if what I was saying was utter nonsense.

“Lady Poa, I’ve brought your liquor.”

A brownie who looked like an even younger girl came over, carrying a tray with glasses of wine. For some reason, she was dressed like a waitress in a traditional Japanese restaurant.

“You want some, too, boy?”

“Sure, thank you.”

Miss Poa, who was now soaking in the water, slurped up the wine delightedly.

It was the same type of fairy grape wine I drank before, a light-red wine with a sweet taste.

Ignoring Poa's rudeness, the long-spoken elf Hiya reached out for a glass of red wine.

"Hey, Poa. Done spider hunting already?"

"Yeah, I landed a big one. Then I let Shiya take care of the annoying little ones."

Poa mimed slicing something up with an invisible sword and grinned.

Just then, a long-haired young elf g— Nope, a boy emerged from the steam and kicked Poa lightly in the back of the head.

His name was Shishitouya, or Shiya for short.

"You 'let' me deal with them? My sword is not meant to cut the likes of mere spider larvae, if you must know."

"C'mon, what's the big deal? At least you got to say your line, right? 'My blade has cut down another worthless thing.'"

Poa swept aside the self-styled samurai's foot with a sneer.

"Hmph. Such foolishness."

Shiya grunted at Poa and sank into the bath.

It sounded to me like a fight was about to break out, but clearly this was just their usual banter, and they began to enjoy the bath without any further sparring.

"Y-you shouldn't go that way, Miss Gia. That's the men's bath!"

"Move."

Unlike the now peaceful men's bath, it sounded like there was some commotion taking place on the ladies' side.

In addition to Lulu's and Gia's voices, I heard Arisa and the beastfolk girls clamoring, too.

A crash and a loud *sploosh* echoed through the bathhouse, and a furious-looking Gia appeared.

She was totally naked, just like Poa was.

If I were a lolicon, I was sure I'd be thrilled about all this.

"Heard."

"You heard what?"

Gia stood imposingly in front of us. I politely offered her a towel, but she made no move to accept it.

"P-please cover yourself up!"

Before the steam could do its job, Lulu hurried over to cover Gia's chest with a towel.

Lulu was wearing a robe, but it was soaked from the bath, leaving it very clingy.

The sight of her figure was almost enough to lead me down the path of temptation, but I managed to maintain my senses.

"Hoo boy, is this paradise or what?!"

"Arisa."

Mia arrived and covered Gia's lower half with another towel, then she scolded Arisa for abandoning their iron-wall duties.

Through the mist, I could see the beastfolk girls and Nana approaching, too.

I guess everyone was gathering on this side now.

"Labyrinth. True?" Gia demanded shortly.

"If you're asking whether we're planning to go to Labyrinth City, then yes, that's right."

Gia and the other elves all frowned at my response.

Thinking back, I remembered a line in Trazayuya's notes from the Cradle: *Many of our youth have died in labyrinths.*

Maybe the elves thought of labyrinths as death traps, then.

"I'm sorry. Did hearing that upset you?"

"No. Dangerous." Gia shook her head.

“Calm down.”

“I know that slow and steady wins the race, but you must be sure that your words are understood if you wish to get anywhere.”

Miss Poa and Shiya the samurai elf cut in front of Gia.

“Mr. Satou, are you really planning to go to Labyrinth City Celivera?” the long-spoken elf Hiya asked.

“Yes, we are.” I nodded.

“Reckless.”

The short-spoken elf Guya, who had been silent until now, added a single word to the chorus of dissent.

“Do you even know what those labyrinths are like? It’s not the kind of place you go just for a lark!”

It seemed that the elves weren’t angry with us, just concerned for our safety.

“W-wait a second. We’re the ones who asked master to take us to Labyrinth City.” Arisa interrupted Hiya, taking the responsibility on herself.

“Indeed. Arisa is not the only one who made the request...”

Liza and the other kids all chorused in agreement.

Glancing at Hiya, I saw that his eyes had turned serious, so I calmed my kids down for the moment.

“Perhaps I should explain...”

After instructing everyone to enter the water so they wouldn’t catch cold, Hiya explained his experiences.

A few hundred years ago, he and the other elves present had trained in the labyrinth in Celivera.

I guess he didn’t become level 40 just by fighting a bunch of low-EXP monsters.

“It was a terrible place. There are lights that illuminate your path, but it’s actually a trap,” he said.

“Light makes shadows, ya know,” Poa added after Arisa looked confused.

“Goblin Assassins appeared from the shadows, and when we tried to retreat to a safe place, we stumbled onto a Hatch Hole. The battle only got worse from there.”

“It was truly a place like unto hell.”

“Weak spirits.”

I would be fine, since I had the map, radar, and so on, but I could see how this would be a hellish place for any ordinary person.

Incidentally, the Hatch Hole Hiya mentioned was basically a monster spawn point like in video games, where a hole suddenly opens in the wall and tons of monsters appear.

“We’ll find theeem.”

“That’s right, sir! Tama and Pochi will find all the monsters, sir!”

Hiya smiled sadly at the beastfolk pair, patting their heads.

“That’s right. Beastfolk have such sharp senses. They were very helpful in places without a lot of spirits, at first.”

At first...?

“But even beastfolk can’t go on forever with their nerves constantly on edge. People can’t live without sleep. And if you want to get to the depths of the labyrinth, you’ll need to be in there for days.”

In retrospect, when I got caught in the labyrinth under Seiryuu City with the beastfolk girls, I hadn’t slept for several days.

My current body seemed to be able to stay awake for around five days easily enough, aside from a bit of strain on the mind.

“And monsters aren’t the only enemies there.”

“Are there bandits as well?” Liza asked.

“Plunderers,” the short-spoken elf Gia responded.

Plunderers must be to labyrinths what pirates were to the high seas, I guess.

“Yes, those too. But I’m actually talking about fellow explorers. They normally won’t attack you, but if you let your guard down after a monster battle, there are those who might try to entrap you. You mustn’t trust anyone in the labyrinth.”

The younger kids looked like they might cry at that.

“But those people are the minority, of course,” Hiya added to reassure them, seeing me embracing the frightened-looking Tama and Pochi.

When we explored a labyrinth, we should probably build our base camp in deep enough that other explorers weren’t likely to come through.

I had Teleport Magic, too, so it should be relatively easy to avoid interpersonal problems.

“Thank you for worrying about us, truly. If it’s all right, would you mind telling us more about your experiences in the labyrinth?”

Hiya looked at me like I was starting to give him a headache.

“D-didn’t you hear everything I just told you?”

“Yes, it was very useful information...”

How strange. Why were they reacting like this when we were just trying to gather information for safety’s sake?

After a moment of silence, the elves formed a huddle and started discussing something.

Left with nothing else to do, I absently patted Tama’s and Pochi’s heads.

Before long, the contact seemed to cheer them up. Tama started purring, and Pochi’s smile returned with a little giggle.

Finally, Shiya the samurai came over in Hiya’s place.

I guess the elf meeting had come to a conclusion.

“You are truly determined to go to the labyrinth, no matter what?”

“Duuuh.”

“O-of course, sir.”

Tama's answer was immediate, though Pochi's came with a bit of a delay.

The other kids all answered "yes" in near-perfect unison.

For some reason, this even included Mia, who was supposed to stay here in the Bolenan Forest.

"Yes, since that's what the children want."

Personally, I'd rather go on a pleasant aboveground journey than explore a dark, damp labyrinth crawling with monsters, but if my friends were going to travel with me in this dangerous world, they did need to raise their levels.

"Then whilst you are here in Bolenan, we shall train you ourselves. None of us wishes to send you on your way only to hear of a tragedy later, like in Traya's time."

It was an unexpected offer, but we all gratefully agreed.

I wasn't that concerned about myself, but it'd be wonderful to have my kids learn the techniques the elves had honed over countless years.

Fairy Training

Satou here. When I played games, I could hardly ever bring myself to use max-recovery potions. It must be because of that time I used them all up on the last boss only to get my ass handed to me when the boss turned out to have a second phase.

“I’m not done yeeet?”

“Quite a skilled fighter, aren’t you? You lack a bit of attack power, but you make up for it with tremendous spatial awareness.”

Shishitouya the samurai elf, or Shiya for short, fended off Tama’s short sword and shield easily as he gave her advice.

We were at an elf training ground near the edge of the Bolenan Forest, bordering monster territory.

It had already been about five days since the events in the public bathhouse; since then, the elves had been instructing my party and me at this training ground.

Today we were having one-on-one matches with our trainers, but most days we just did practice combat.

Our opponents on those days were dummies the elves magically constructed out of grass, mud, and so on.

On days when we practiced against monsters, the hunting master Hishirotouya and I would go out into the monster territory outside the forest and bring back enemies.

The only options in that territory were two extremes: The monsters were all either less than level 10 or higher than level 40.

“Take this, ma’am!”

“Good charge, but pay more attention to your surroundings. If there had been

a trap in the grass between us, you'd already be caught."

Pochi, who was holding a one-handed sword with both her small hands, was sparring with the curly-haired Portomea, or Miss Poa.

"I eat traps for breakfast, ma'am!"

"Don't be a fool! Minus one point."

Poa emphasized her scolding with a smack from the paper fan in her hand, one of Arisa's latest works.

"Aren't you the real fool for calling me a fool, ma'am?"

"Oh, be quiet. You must mind your teacher's words. If I tell you to give me your hamburg steak, you have to do it, even if you're hungry!"

At this shocking declaration, Pochi turned pale and teary-eyed.

Seeing this, Poa hastily corrected herself.

"Sorry, I didn't mean that about the steak. If it was a rice ball, maybe."

"All right, ma'am. A rice ball would be fine, ma'am."

I guess hamburg steaks were extra-special to Pochi.

"She can use Spellblade at her level...?"

"Promising."

Yusek, a short spear-wielding spriggan, and Gurgapoya (Guya), a short-spoken elf who used a helix spear, were impressed with Liza's moves.

We'd just met Mr. Yusek today, but he was as skilled with a spear as Guya and said to be the strongest of the spriggans living in the Bolenan Forest.

When he introduced himself, he even showed us his trick of making Spellblade fly off the tip of his short spear.

I asked him to show us again, but he simply told me to "steal it."

Easy for him to say when he hasn't done the trick again since.

It was pretty neat, so I'd definitely like to learn how eventually.

"Combine with magic."

“You can’t stop a charging monster with a shield alone! You have to use your magic at the same time and not worry so much about preserving all of your magic power. Don’t be stingy with the Body Strengthening!”

“Advice accepted.”

The other short-spoken elf of the party, magic swordsman Gimasarua (or Gia), was teaching Nana, along with the shield-using dwarf Keriul. He was pretty strong at level 38.

As it turned out, Keriul was also the uncle of Zajuul, the lovestruck smith I’d met in the dwarves’ independent city of Bolehart.

There weren’t any elves who specialized in shields, so Hiya, who had a lot of connections, had brought the dwarf from the leprechaun village where he was studying.

“Miss Lulu, be careful not to bend your knees.”

“Y-yes, Miss Nea.”

“Nnngh, I can’t help it! They’re gonna breeeak!”

“Arisa, one must be flexible if one wishes to excel at martial arts. Try to be more bendable.”

Surprisingly, Nea the cook was the one training Lulu and Arisa.

Despite the elves’ magical excellence, there were very few who could use Space Magic, and all of them were away on business with the high elf Aialize, so none could train Arisa.

Miss Nea had offered to teach Arisa self-defense instead and ended up roping in Lulu as well.

Lulu’s Magic Gun and Arisa’s chant-less Space Magic weren’t well suited to close combat with humanoids, so this worked out perfectly.

Mia was away with her mother at the stone stage, where she was being initiated in the art of Spirit Magic.

Impressed by the convenience of Spirit Magic, Arisa briefly considered acquiring the skill but abandoned that idea as soon as she saw that it cost even

more skill points than Space Magic.

“Now, Satou, shall we begin our training as well?”

“Yes, sir.”

Hishirotoya, the long-spoken elf, was my teacher.

“...◆ **Breeze** Soyokaze.”

“...▲ **Breeze** Soyokaze.”

“...▼ **Breeze** Soyokaze.”

Yes, he was training me in using chants.

I’d been using scrolls as a loophole to increase the amount of spells I could use from my magic menu, but I still wanted to learn to use magic properly.

Scrolls could be made only for spells up to intermediate magic, not to mention that I had to personally request them from Viscount Siemmen’s scroll workshop.

I did use magic in front of Hishirotoya during the hunting trip the other day, but he assumed that was just a hero’s unique skill of some kind, so he didn’t comment on the fact that I couldn’t use chants.

“...■ **Breeze** Soyokaze!”

A gentle breeze brushed against my cheek, but it definitely wasn’t I who’d caused it.

“Easy.”

It was Goya, who’d officially developed a grudge against me when I beat him at buffalo hunting.

“Goya, if you’re going to get in the way, just go home.”

“Mrrr. Demonstrating.”

Hishirotoya frowned at Goya’s smug expression.

The scolding did nothing to lessen his smirk, though.

Clearly, he was pleased to have found something he could beat me at.

I was privately a little irritated, but I used my “Poker Face” skill to deflect his taunting with the attitude of a mature adult.



“Don’t let it get you down, Satou.”

“I’m not particularly upset.”

I brushed off the consolation of my teacher, Hishirotoya, as lightly as I could.

Training might make you think of working from dawn till dusk to master something, but the elves’ idea of it was a bit more relaxed, probably because they lived more than a hundred times longer than humans did. Our training lasted only a couple of hours each afternoon.

The elves’ training began with a lecture explaining the point of the exercises we were about to do, then it moved on to more hands-on training, concluding with a sort of review meeting summarizing the day.

Today, as it often did, the final meeting took place in the steamy tubs of the public bathhouse.

“Satou.”

With a little *splloosh*, Mia plopped down next to me, along with her mother, Lilinatoa. They’d just returned from Spirit Magic training.

Perhaps it was because she was an elf, but Lilinatoa definitely didn’t look like a woman who had ever given birth.

After I greeted the pair, I resumed my conversation with Hishirotoya.

“Why, it took Goya more than thirty years before he could chant properly.”

“Th-that’s quite a long time.”

I was surprised he’d been willing to keep at it for thirty years, honestly.

That knowledge would probably soften the blow next time he showed up grinning smugly at me.

“Phew, you finally smiled!”

Arisa looked up at me with a relieved expression.

“The bath is one of the only times our master ever lets his feelings show on his face, you see,” she added to Mia, speaking around me.

“Mm. Got it.”

Since we’d gotten into the habit of all bathing together after training, I explained things to the elves and got permission for everyone to use bathrobes.

None of the elves was wearing one, however.

Hishirotoya gave this explanation:

“We elves are like one big family, and we don’t lust after the opposite sex as intensely as most other races do.”

Most likely, this meant that elves had a low reproduction rate, as was often the case in stories.

If they bred like humans, the world would be full of elves by now.

“I’m amazed you have children at all, then!”

“Well, elves *do* fall in love. If those feelings remain for a hundred years or so, marriage is usually the next step.”

Hishirotoya’s answer seemed to miss the point of Arisa’s remark ever so slightly.

“Marriaaage?”

“We saw a wedding parade in the old capital, sir!”

Tama and Pochi, who were playing around with their towels in the water, perked up at the mention of a familiar word.

“What are elf weddings like?”

“Aaze.”

“Blessing.”

The two short-spoken elves answered Arisa’s question.

Of course, their meaning was unclear, so we asked the more verbose elves to explain.

“The couple takes an oath of marriage in the World Tree, and Lady Aaze

confers a blessing upon them. Then the pair pours their magic into the Holytree Stone they receive and nurtures it along with their love.”

If I remembered correctly, the Holytree Stone was also known as a Philosopher’s Stone, the object that was the base of the powder Aialize had me use at the stone stage.

The stone must be used as a sort of wedding ring or registration.

“Once a couple has been married for between ten and fifty years, they will generally enter the mating season. It is easy to tell when a child has been conceived, as the bearer will experience a craving for the Holytree Stone. It’s believed that if the mother consumes water containing the powder of the Holytree Stone while pregnant, the child will be happy and healthy.”

A Holytree Stone was basically a magic-boosting item, so maybe the elves needed magic power to develop a fetus.

Come to think of it, the kobolds I’d met in the Muno Barony said that they needed jewels called blue crystals to have children, too.

Maybe it was for similar reasons.

“What are you all talking about? I think Mia may be a bit young for this sort of education.”

A beautiful platinum-blond woman emerged from the steam: the high elf Aialize.

It was hard not to get flustered upon seeing the naked body of someone who was just my type.

“Aaze.”

“It’s unusual to see you in the public bathhouse, Lady Aaze.”

The other elves’ words went in one ear and out the other.

Embarrassingly enough, I was so entranced by Aialize’s gold-standard body that it was like I’d rocketed back to puberty.

I couldn’t even tear my eyes away, let alone make some kind of clever greeting.

And Aialize, whose face turned red before my staring eyes, seemed to be in a similar state.

“Whatever is the matter, Lady Aaze?”

Lua the shrine maiden appeared behind Aialize, looking at her in confusion.

“Ah! Mia, quick!”

“Mm. Guilty.”

I had never felt so grateful for the iron-wall pair’s devotion and, at the same time, so bitter.

The girls hid Aialize from my view, during which time she quickly plunged her nude body into the bathwater.

“Thank you, Arisa.”

“Hmph! You never get like that when you see *us* naked.”

“Mm. Rude.”

I let the angry girls scold me without arguing back and then asked Lulu to bring a robe for Aialize.

Ideally, I would have just moved from the so-called men’s bath to the women’s bath, but a certain fellow standing at attention down below was making it impossible for me to leave at that moment.

Instead, I would just have to muddle through a safe conversation until my “situation” calmed down.

“I’m terribly sorry for staring so rudely, Lady Aialize.”

“U-uh-huh...”

Aialize simply gazed at me with her face half-underwater.

Was it just my imagination, or were her eyes wandering around my shoulders and collarbone?

“What has gotten into you, Lady Aaze? You’re behaving like a young maiden who...”

“...Lua?”

Lua trailed off mid-sentence, causing the short-spoken Miss Gia to look at her in concern.

“N-no, it’s nothing. It couldn’t be.”

“Mrrr.”

Lua’s face said that it was definitely something, but she dismissed the conversation anyway.

Gia still looked concerned, but she didn’t pry any further, since she was probably reluctant to bother Lua.

And so the awkwardness remained for the rest of our brief bath time.

“Ahhh! Coffee milk after a bath is the best thing ever!”

Arisa put a hand on her hip and chugged the bottled coffee milk ecstatically.

Fortunately, her cheerful voice banished any remaining awkwardness in the air. If people had type attributes, Arisa would definitely be Light.

At any rate, her excitement made all the work that went into that bottle worth it.

“Arisa, regular milk is superior, I report.”

“Mrrr. Fruit milk.”

Nana and Mia, who were clad only in towels wrapped around their bodies, chimed in with their own preferences.

My guess was that Nana just liked the cute cow mascot I put on the label of the regular milk bottles.

“Carbonation ruuules?”

“The popping is so exciting, sir.”

Tama and Pochi, who were wearing pajama pants with embroidered paw designs and short camisoles, slurped at their bottles to avoid spilling any of the bubbly carbonated water.

Lulu was wearing a T-shirt and shorts as she stretched in one corner of the room, so she must have been planning on hydrating later.

And Liza, always a bath fanatic, was still enjoying her time in the tub.

“Mm, delicious!”

Miss Aialize looked thrilled as she stood in front of the glass-doored refrigerator sipping fruit-flavored milk.

For some reason, her voice was always crystal clear even in the noisiest places.

It probably just seemed that way because it was so pleasing to my ears.

“This yellorange fruit drink is wonderful. One of your new creations, Nea?”

“No, Lady Aaze. All these drinks were made by Mr. Satou. He shared the recipes, too, so I can make it for you anytime.”

“Satou made this?”

Aialize’s surprised voice had a note of pure admiration.

For some reason, I felt very proud of that.

“Come to think of it, has the public bathhouse always had this magic cold-storage device?”

“Satou.”

“Satou made that for us as well.”

The other elves answered Lua’s question.

“You’re so talented, Satou!”

“Not at all. I just happened to get a hold of a very large ice stone in the old capital, so...”

Aialize’s earnest praise caught me so off guard that I barely registered the vague excuse I made in response.

Just like when we were in the bath, I felt strange somehow, as if I were experiencing puberty all over again...

But for whatever reason, part of me couldn’t help thinking that it wasn’t a bad thing.

“This is an emergency.”

“Mm. Danger.”

Arisa and Mia furrowed their brows and leaned together conspiratorially, but I was in such an inexplicably good mood that it didn't bother me one bit.



“Hambuuurg.”

“Hooray, sir! Professor Hamburg is as wonderful as ever today, sir!”

Tama and Pochi did a triumphant dance when they saw what was for dinner.

Everyone from the bathhouse was gathered around the table in the tree house, as well as Nea and the other cooking-obsessed elf girls.

I was teaching Mia's mother and Nea the tofu hamburg steak recipe.

“I love hamburg steak.”

“All of Mr. Satou's cooking is delicious, really.”

Aialize and Lua, who I'd invited along partly as an apology for the incident in the bathhouse, seemed to be impressed with the dish as well.

“If you've got this steak fried in soy sauce, why even bother with the vegetable salad?”

“Now, now. You've got to eat a balanced diet,” I scolded Arisa, shaking my head.

I'd been making a lot of protein-heavy dishes to go along with our training, but I wasn't exactly looking to turn my party into a bunch of muscle-bound hulks, so I still included other things besides meat.

Today's fried dish was made with whale meat, but there was also a rocket wolf steak. The buffalo meat was delicious, too, but we'd get tired of it if we ate the same kind of meat too many times in a row.

However, the elves had a few complaints about the monster meat dishes on the table.

“Monster meat.”

“Safe?”

Did elves have an aversion to eating monster meat?

“How unusual. But Lady Aaze is here, so we should be fine, no?”

“Mm. No miasma.”

Miasma was what demons collected to resurrect a demon lord, right?

“Does monster flesh contain miasma?”

“That’s right. But since miasma is weak to divinity and strong spirit light, it gets purified just by being near Lady Aaze, so there’s no harm done,” Hishirotoya responded.

So if Miss Aialize wasn’t around, it could cause harm?

But we ate it all the time, and so did a lot of people in the Muno Barony now...

“The meat of weak monsters isn’t a problem. Besides, your spirit light is even stronger than Lady Aaze’s, so if the meat was processed near you, the miasma would disperse to the point of harmlessness.”

Hishirotoya went on to clarify that if one used something like the chaos jar or malice urn that the demon lord–worshipping cult Wings of Freedom used to collect miasma, they could purge the meat of miasma even without me around.

Maybe the stat-raising effect from eating fried whale meat was even a result of residual miasma.

Not that I was planning on eating any miasma-filled monster meat to test that theory.

At any rate, with that problem solved, we started eating.

“Satou. Tastes weird.”

Mia, who was eating a tofu hamburg steak, frowned uncertainly.

“It’s tastyyy.”

“Don’t be rude to Professor Hamburg, sir!”

Tama and Pochi defended the hamburg. At least they licked the sauce off their forks before waving them around; that was probably Lulu’s or Liza’s teachings at work.

Today, I'd given Mia a normal tofu hamburg without any alterations. I was eating the same thing, but it tasted perfectly satisfactory to me.

"You don't like it? Try the tofu hamburg steak on this plate, then."

I pulled out a spare from the warming magic tool and placed it in front of Mia.

"Mm. Yum."

Pleased with that bite, Mia started to munch away happily on that dish instead.

Tama and Pochi split the rest of the tofu she'd abandoned, although they shoved any non-potato vegetables onto Mia's plate.

I guess I had better break the news.

"Mia, there's something I have to tell you."

"Mm?"

I approached Mia calmly, but for some reason she closed her eyes and puckered her lips. Arisa was a bad influence on her.

"It's about the hamburg steaks," I continued pointedly.

At this, her expression immediately turned displeased.

"The one you just ate had meat in it."

I'd been increasing the proportion of meat in her tofu hamburg steaks since we first started staying in the tree house. The one she'd just happily consumed was about 70 percent meat.

"...Guilty."

Mia gave me a look of dramatic betrayal.

"I know. I'm sorry. But the first hamburg steak I gave you earlier had no meat in it. It was a regular tofu hamburg steak."

"Mrrr."

Mia seemed conflicted, so I gave her one final push. "Mia, which kind would you like more of?"

"Mrrr. This one."

Mia pointed at the tofu hamburg steak with meat in it.

“Mm. Yum.”

Overcoming her distaste, Mia gave a satisfied smile as she ate the meat-and-tofu-combination steak.

She still didn’t seem to be able to eat a normal hamburg steak with only meat, but I’d like to think she’d overcome her dislike of meat at least a little.

“You can have a bite of this real hamburg steak, sir.”

“Mrrr. Uh-uh.”

Pochi offered her a forkful with plenty of gravy, but Mia shook her head rapidly and pushed it away.

You just couldn’t rush these things.

Once the meal was partway over, Nea updated me on the progress of our curry operation.

Miss Noa was the one who really wanted to reproduce the curry, but she was very shy, so Nea was running the operation for her.

“So the spriggans and leprechauns are willing to search for the spices for us?”

“Yes, they seemed quite excited. Said it was a race to see who could locate the legendary ingredients first.”

Spriggans had slightly gray-brown skin, while leprechauns had coppery skin. Both were short with slightly pointed ears, as was characteristic of all fairy races.

Unfortunately, classic races like half-elves and dark elves were sadly nonexistent.

To think that I would never get to meet a busty brown-skinned dark elf... This parallel world wasn’t nearly fantasy enough, if you asked me.

“By the way, the World Tree actually governs darkness, and all elves get dark skin if they’re in the sun long enough. Incidentally, it’s impossible for even fellow fairy races to interbreed. Aside from specific exceptions like humans and beastfolk, only certain similar species of beastfolk, like catfolk and tigerfolk or

dogfolk and wolffolk, can reproduce with one another.”

Wow, so humans and beastfolk could interbreed?

I guess I had known that, since Tama and Pochi were born to humans with ancestral traits.

“Not even elves and high elves?”

“Of course not. Our roots are fundamentally different.”

Roots?

I supposed high elves did look more like humans than regular elves.

“High elves are demi-gods. They come from the divine realm, like the World Tree or the gods themselves.”

Lua the shrine maiden was the one who casually divulged this crucial information.

...So Aialize is a demi-goddess?

It was hard to think of her as divine when she was stuffing her cheeks with hamburg steak and chicken-stuffed omelet rice.

If anything, she was more like a hapless older sister.

...Not that there was anything wrong with a hapless older-sister figure.

“Is the divine realm where gods and goddesses like Lady Parion live?”

“No, it’s—”

“Lady Aaze, please don’t speak while you’re eating.”

“...Mph!”

“L-Lady Aaze?”

Aialize tried to swallow too quickly because of Lua’s scolding and ended up choking instead.

I hurried over to her side with “Warp,” offering her a glass from the table.

“Here, drink some water. Slowly, now.”

She seemed to be fairly used to being cared for.

“Th-thank you, Satou.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Once she drank the water and took a deep breath, Aialize thanked me with a faint smile.

I’d been in such a hurry before that I used “Warp,” but nobody seemed to have noticed.

“So what sort of place is the divine realm exactly?”

“It’s the world of the god of creation who made us high elves and the World Trees. But we were sent out along with the World Trees when we were young, so most of us have little to no memories of the place.”

I guess the myths I saw in those picture books a while back were true, then.

The eight deities, including Parion, came to the world aboard the eight World Trees.

This world itself existed independently of the god who created the World Trees, and the gods essentially came here to pioneer the place rather than being assigned here.

Other than dragons, the original inhabitants of this world, all living things here were born of seeds that were pooled in the World Trees. They weren’t created by the gods from the picture book like Parion was.

So were World Trees like the gods’ cross-dimensional seeding ships?

This sounded more like science fiction than fantasy to me.

“Satou.”

Clearly uninterested in Aialize’s and the others’ explanations of the mythology of this world, Mia plopped into my lap, bored.

“Mia, there’s food on your face.”

“Clean.”

I sighed and wiped Mia’s face with a handkerchief.

Something had caught my attention before, but I’d forgotten what it was

while I was taking care of Mia.

Allowing my gaze to wander in the hope that it might come back to me, I noticed that Miss Aialize had some rice on her cheek.

“Pardon me, Lady Aialize.”

I reached out and plucked the grain of rice from her face, then popped it into my own mouth like I would while taking care of one of the younger kids.

“Aaah!”

Arisa and Mia cried out furiously. The word *traitor* was all but written across their faces.

For some reason, even Lulu exclaimed with them, looking at me with sad eyes.

“Lady Aaze?”

Nea’s voice drew my eyes back to Aialize, who’d turned bright red and looked ready to pass out.

It reminded me of Miss Karina, who was on her way to the royal capital.

Something was strange, though. Aialize didn’t seem to be afraid of men like Karina was, and she should be accustomed to people taking care of her.

For whatever reason, Arisa and Mia had clearly decided that Aialize was their enemy now.

“Me too, master!”

“Here.”

The two of them leaned close to me, having deliberately stuck chicken rice onto their faces.

“Don’t play with your food, girls.”

I didn’t want them to be a bad influence on Pochi and Tama, so I moved to clean their faces with a handkerchief, but their eyes were so desperate that I gave in and took the rice off by hand instead.

Just as I’d feared, Tama and Pochi started to copy them, but Liza told them off

for me.

The meal seemed to have died down, so I decided to bring out dessert.

When I returned from the kitchen with pudding, Aialize and Lua were gone.

According to Arisa, they'd been called back to work on urgent business.

Their markers were moving high in the World Tree, so maybe something was happening in orbit or even in the void of space.

I'd have liked to help them, but I didn't know whether it was appropriate for an outsider like me to stick my nose into their business. I was somehow very afraid of butting in and possibly getting turned away by Aialize.

So much for my usual nosiness.



"Huh! What a strange fiber. It's not rubber, but it's not synthetic, either."

Arisa was very interested in the rare textiles arranged on a shelf in the sewing workshop.

Three days had passed since the incident in the bath. Today, my ever-popular master Hishirotoya had introduced Arisa and me to a sewing workshop owner.

I was told they had magic cloth, so I'd been looking forward to the trip.

The workshop was in a special domed area for such places, next to the secret underground city where everyone actually lived.

The other children were picking wild plants in the forest near the tree house under Mia's guidance.

"It's the shrinking cloth of an Arido Arachne—it shrinks if you put magic power into it. We have ordinary rubber, too, so if you need any, we can get some from the warehouse later."

"You have rubber?!"

"Y-yes, it grows in the south of the forest. It smells unpleasant when it's processed, though, so I would personally suggest the fiber of a bouncer fruit from the Mountain-Trees or Oil Spider thread, if you're using it for cloth..."

The Elvish workshop owner seemed a little taken aback by Arisa's enthusiasm.

She looked like an adorable little girl but spoke in the tone of an old townie grandmother, making for a pretty impressive contrast.

We already used bouncer fruit fiber for our socks and underwear.

The Oil Spider thread turned out to be what was used for the knee socks I saw in Mia's little fashion show.

She also demonstrated fabric that was made from White Hornworm thread. Its feel and finish were exactly like synthetic fibers.

"There are quite a few fabrics that react to magic, aren't there?"

"That's right. Yuriha fiber, which was popularized by the gnomes long ago, is the most famous, but there are others, too. Kenea worm cloth reflects magic, for instance, while fiber made from the leaves of the World Tree amplifies magic power."

Ohhh, nice. Those are some very fantasy-style fabrics.

Intrigued, I asked if she knew about any other rare cloth products.

"Others? Let me see... Well, legend has it that the Viroanan clan of high elves weave textiles from the silver hide of the giant monster fish, which can repel even advanced Light Magic and Holy Swords."

That was an even cooler concept than I'd expected.

But the giant monster fish Tobkezerra—whales, basically—that I'd defeated in the old capital had black hides.

Maybe there was a rare spawn large monster fish subspecies with silver skin?

If I could get a hold of that material, I could really enhance the defensive power of our everyday clothes.

"So there are giant monster fish with silver skin as well? I thought for sure they were only black."

"Oh? Have you seen a giant monster fish before, Mr. Satou?"

"Yes, just once."

“Well, well. I’m surprised you got away safely.” The workshop owner looked impressed.

I guess not all of the elves knew that I was the hero who held my own in a fight against a black dragon.

“Right, the silver hide. That doesn’t refer to the epidermis, you see. As I recall...”

The workshop owner opened a thick book on a table and cast some sort of spell.

Small particles of light gathered around the book, and the pages began to flip on their own.

Then, the book stopped on an illustration of a familiar-looking whale. Automatic searching magic? That was pretty convenient.

“Here it is. Can you read Elvish?”

According to the ancient Elvish explanation the workshop owner pointed out, there was a layer of metallic-colored fat in between the skin and bones of the whale’s head that had strong impact-resistant properties. When hardened, it became the silver hide the workshop owner was referring to.

The methods for processing it continued for another twenty pages or so, but most of it was about how to cut the hide down to a reasonable size and how to break it down into fibers.

There were other sewing-related secrets recorded in this book, too.

If I could find out the raw materials and processing methods involved, I’d love to try making some things. With my map search, I could track down just about any material.

“Thank you for sharing this valuable knowledge with me. Once I manage to get some silver hide, I’ll be sure to bring it here.”

“If that ever happens, I’ll make you the best clothes you ever saw.”

I was planning on processing the hide and bringing it here within the next few days, but the shop owner seemed to think I was joking.

While I was at it, I also asked about good materials for sailcloth.

“Sailcloth? I’d recommend cloth made with ironshell fruit fibers with increased volatility. If you have enough wind stones, you can treat it to create wind, so you’d be able to sail even when the air is calm.”

I still had a lot of ironshell fruits from the giants’ village and a decent handful of wind stones from the Muno Barony. Maybe I could find out how to process them?

“Other than that... If Hiya’s place has monster materials in stock, a hydra wing or one from a big enough wyvern makes a great sail, too.”

While I was lost in thought, the workshop owner gave me more suggestions.

I had plenty of those, too, but the image of a hydra wing sail sounded like the makings of a demon lord’s ship to me, so I decided I’d rather stick with the ironshell fruit / wind stone combo.

“Dearie me—we got a bit off topic there. Now, I suppose I’ll teach you embroidery first.”

“Aw, what?! Um, embroidery is a bit—”

“Now, now, child. If you’re making clothes out of fabric, you simply must put love into them with needlework.”

Arisa, who didn’t like such fiddly work, started to protest, but the workshop owner seemed used to getting this attitude from young people and cheerfully steamrolled over her.

Thus, we started learning to embroider under her guidance.

“...Very nicely done, Satou.”

Looking at my finished work, the shop owner gave a small sigh of admiration.

Somewhere in the course of her teaching, she’d dropped the “Mr.” and started simply calling me “Satou.”

“It’s more fun than I expected it to be.”

“Isn’t it, though?”

She nodded triumphantly.

I wasn't just being polite. I'd thought we would simply be making little patterns, but her "embroidery" turned out to use Rune Magic and magic circles to create magic tool-like functions.

Unlike the makeshift thing I made with light stones in the old capital, these were patterns that had been refined over hundreds or even thousands of years.

"Still, Satou, your skills may be on par with the oldest of elves, but your artistry could use work... You have to be willing to experiment a little more if you hope to become a first-class craftsman. You could learn a thing or two from Arisa on that front."

"I'll do my best."

Though it wasn't as bad as my lack of musical sense, I was never very good at artsy stuff. I just preferred to keep things simple.

Meanwhile, despite being praised for her artistry, Arisa was muttering to herself darkly as she worked.

"Aaargh, this suuucks!"

Finally, unable to bear it any longer, Arisa shrieked at the ceiling.

I guess what she needed to learn was patience.

"Heyo, is Kea here?"

While the workshop owner was reviewing Arisa's and my collaborative work on a maid outfit, a new elf entered the room.

Her oil-smeared face, overalls, big boots, and gloves all screamed that she was a technician of some kind. She even had glasses on a cord around her neck.

But despite my assumptions, the AR display stated that she was a **First-Class World Tree Gardener**.

"Why, if it isn't Jia. Rare to see you leaving the observatory."

"How many void suits have you finished?"

"I've got two here now, but I just delivered five of them to you..."

"Well, there was a bit of an incident up there... Please just give me the two you've finished. And we kind of need seven more as soon as possible..."

“That’s not happening, and you know it.”

The workshop owner flatly shut down the proposed deadline and then left to get the finished products from the warehouse.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought...”

Miss Jia slumped into a chair, so I gave her a bubbly yellorange-flavored drink to help with her exhaustion.

“Thank you. We haven’t met, have we? I’m Jilsaria. Usually, my job is to maintain the emerald branches in the space observatory.”

Jia sounded world-weary as she introduced herself and sipped the beverage automatically.

Her expression reminded me so strongly of a programmer being forced to do the impossible during a death march that my heart went out to her immediately.

“But now I’ve got to deal with those annoying jellyfish, so I can’t do much proper maintenance... Ahhh, I hope Puya’s anti-sap-pollution project is going all right...”

Uh-oh. She was starting to mutter incomprehensibly to herself.

At times like this, a drink worked better than any kind words.

I knew just what an exhausted engineer needed.

“Miss Jia, please drink this, too.”

“Sure, thanks. I’d rather some liquor, to be honest, but that’d just knock me out...”

I handed Jia a nutritional supplement potion.

She drank it in between muttering, then suddenly hopped out of her chair, looking totally refreshed.

“What is this?! Some kind of miracle potion?! It’s amazing!”

I had several barrels’ worth of stock of the potion, so I would happily give some to her coworkers, too, if she liked it that much.

“Be careful not to stand up too fast, or you might get dizzy. If you like, you can take these to your fellow workers, too.”

“Man, that’d be fantastic. Normally we get by with the Forest Magic spell Stamina Charge, but I guess we’ve been using it too much, ’cause lately it’s not really cutting it.”

I took about thirty potions out of Storage by way of the Garage Bag, put them in a sack, and handed them to Miss Jia.

I just couldn’t turn a blind eye to the struggles of a fellow engineer, since it was like watching my past self.

...Oh wait, isn’t Jia technically a gardener?

“Thanks for waiting.”

Kea returned with the void suits floating on a Practical Magic Floating Board.

“S-space suits?!” Arisa exclaimed in surprise.

If anything, I thought they looked more like old-fashioned diving suits. All the rivets really gave them that retro feel.

“Thanks a ton, Kea.”

Looking relieved, Miss Jia accepted the void suits and put them away in a large Magic Bag.

“...Hmm? What happened, Jia? You look like a different person from before.”

“Yeah, the potion this human gave me sorted me out. Please deliver the last five as soon as you can, okay?”

With that, Jia waved and left the workshop.

“Easy for her to say... All my helpers who’re good enough to sew void suits are away helping Lady Aaze, and there’s no way I can finish all five on my own. I’d have to wake up our ancestors who are abed or something—”

The workshop owner abruptly covered her mouth with her hands, cutting off the stream of complaints after Jia was gone.

I was guessing these ancestors were the elves sleeping in the secret part of the World Tree. *Abed* was probably a code word for the sleep tanks.

Waking the elves from their sleep tanks was probably a huge taboo in their culture.

“...I’m terribly sorry. There’s no point complaining to you about it.”

The workshop owner smiled sheepishly, and Arisa suddenly jumped to her feet.

“But there is! You’ve got one skilled helper right here!”

Arisa pointed straight at me.

The workshop owner clapped her hands together in hopeful realization, so I agreed to her request to help make the void suits.

If it would help the busy Miss Aialize even a little, I didn’t mind a bit of hard work.

And so the workshop owner and I got to work...

“I underestimated elves’ sense of the passage of time.”

“Incredible. We’ve finished it before dinnertime.”

In the course of about half a day, the workshop owner and I managed to complete one void suit.

If we worked hard through the night, we could probably finish all five in less than two days, but after we completed the first one, she declared it was time to stop.

Part of the reason might have been that she had only two suits’ worth of the necessary magic tools, like air purification and heat control, so there was no sense in rushing.

I knew this, but the programmer in me who prioritized deadlines above all else couldn’t help feeling frustrated.

If I didn’t hold back at all, I could use 120 Magic Hands to simultaneously produce them through the night and have thirty suits by morning.

Like that time I mass-produced the silver chains in the old capital...

“Master? Your face is getting a bit scary.”

Arisa prodded my cheeks, bringing me back to my senses.

I must have gotten a little carried away with my desire to show off to Miss Aialize. Sure, this was a chance to score some points with a girl who was totally my type, but it shouldn't come at the cost of making my wards worry.

"I was just remembering when I used to do death marches every day," I explained, using my "Fabrication" skill to come up with a good excuse. Then I took a deep breath to cool my heated face.

"Thank you, Arisa."

"Oh, don't worry about it."

Arisa jokingly struck a little pose of triumph over calming me down.

I patted her head and then started making the remaining four suits with the materials I'd gotten from the workshop owner.

The work progressed smoothly, and aside from the final magic tools that still needed to be added, the suits were finished within about two hours.

I was still holding back pretty significantly, but when I finished the work and looked up, Arisa was gaping at me with wide eyes.

Oh well.



"So you're the Satou fellow Hiya mentioned? Sure, you can check things out."

The next morning, after I'd finished two more void suits in the sewing workshop, I came to a magic-tool studio that Hishirotoya had introduced me to.

Of course, my goal was to help make the controller devices for the suits.

Once the studio owner, Mr. Kiya, agreed to have me, Hishirotoya left with a smile.

I'd already explained the circumstances and gotten permission to take the day off from training.

If only my manager at my old job had agreed to give paid time off so easily...

I shook off that desolate thought and focused on observing as Kiya and his

apprentices made magic tools.

Unlike when humans made magic tools, most of the elves seemed to use alchemy and magic at the same time.

“You fool! How many times have I told you to mind the temperature when handling breathgrass?!”

“I’m sorry.”

“This endothermic liquid is terrible quality! Make it again! We can’t afford much more of this.”

“Yes, sir.”

I heard quite a few of these exchanges.

I could do this so much better..., I thought, like a classic anime protagonist.

Maybe I was just frustrated because the work here was getting bottlenecked so easily.

Kiya and his apprentices had just finished the first magic circuit, the core of the magic tool.

“Mr. Kiya, would it be all right if I help out, too?”

“Huh? It’s not as easy as it looks, you know.”

“Yes, I am well aware.”

In fact, Kiya’s demands of his apprentices were so intense, they would probably fail if their “Transmutation” skill wasn’t at least level 7.

“Fine, then. Just don’t get in the way.”

With his permission, I began to help.

“Satou! Contest!”

Mia’s childhood friend Goya appeared at the door, but...

“You moron! Making magic tools isn’t a game! Come back when you can make a basic magic circuit!”

...Kiya sent him running home with tears in his eyes. I felt a little bad.

For now, though, it was time to help out.

Any time one of the apprentices looked about to fail, I sneakily helped fine-tune the large transmutation equipment, used the Air Control spell to manipulate the temperature, and so on.

“Hmm. This just barely gets passing marks.”

Once we’d finished making components that met Kiya’s high standards, we started putting it all together.

The rest of the process was all in the hands of Kiya and his highest-level apprentices, all of whom had a “Transmutation” skill level of 9 or above, so my help wasn’t needed.

Relieved, I set about stealing their techniques instead.

I was able to figure out the process from the raw materials to the completed product, so all I needed now was the equipment and I’d be able to mass-produce void suits all on my own.

However, the team was able to finish the required amount of magic equipment for the void suits with about three hours left before sunset, so I didn’t end up needing to butt in.

Miss Doa, one of the main staff of the studio, brought the completed void suit magic tools to the sewing workshop along with two of the apprentices.

Taking advantage of the relaxed atmosphere now that the quota had been met, I asked what they normally made in the studio.

“Master Kiya and Master Doa usually make manned golems for use in space. I specialize in magic wands and staves. My research revolves around improving magic-power amplification and reducing consumption.”

“Living dolls.”

“I mainly develop single-seat magic aircrafts.”

“Magic storage devices.”

Ohhh, all their research sounded fascinating.

“What is it? You interested in golems?”

Kiya, who'd been listening to the conversation, looked eager as he dragged me to a garage in the back of the studio.

We hadn't really been talking about golems, but I certainly was interested, so I followed him without protest.

The one there was an eight-legged spider-type golem. Its head appeared to be the cockpit.

It reminded me of collaborating with the mechanical engineering students to make a multi-legged Mars exploration robot back in college.

I had been in charge of programming, but since I made the driver software with the assembler, I had a decent amount of knowledge about the hardware, too.

"A golem with a pilot is pretty unique, right? Not only can it crawl all over the World Tree with its eight legs, it can even produce fire from this hole and propel itself through the void."

I was a little confused by Kiya's proud statement.

"Fire? Not compressed air?"

"Explosions are a more efficient use of magic."

Huh. So flying with magic like that must have cost less than a propellant or compressed air.

I guess relying too much on my scientific knowledge could lead to strange pitfalls in this world.

"What about an aerodynamic engine? Does that have to do with efficiency, too?"

"You mean skypower? There's no air in the void, so it wouldn't work."

So the void was definitely similar to outer space, then.

"How does this valve here operate?"

"There's a winding mechanism at the end of this metal cord. An ultrasmall living doll inside the golem cranks it."

What a strange structure—I wasn't sure whether it was low-tech or high-tech.

Couldn't it just be set up to rotate when magic turned the device on?

I proposed a simpler mechanism to Mr. Kiya.

It could probably be used for controlling the sails on a boat and such, too.

While I was talking to Kiya about the mechanics of the golem, Doa came into the room. She was about as high-ranked in the studio as Kiya; they seemed to be husband and wife.

"Just looking at it from the outside won't convey how much the golem is really worth. It's got an intelligence circuit using Holytree Stone on the inside. Look, Satou. This is basically the golem's brain."

Doa led me into the cockpit, opened a wooden case, and showed me a remarkable magic circuit with a glowing blue stone set in the center.

I didn't know how they did it, but there was a complicated magic circuit carved inside the transparent blue stone, too.

"The intelligence circuit receives orders from the cockpit and uses its own judgment to manipulate the eight legs. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course."

I'm a programmer, after all.

I'd studied control of multi-legged robots to the point where I'd even read foreign papers on the subject.

Intrigued, I went out on a limb and asked Miss Doa to show me the circuit diagram.

"If you think you can read it, go right ahead," she answered simply and offered me a sheaf of papers.

They were a little complicated, but thanks to my maxed-out INT stat, I was able to figure them out in a reasonably short time.

Even in a parallel world, the process of trial and error was essentially the same.

It had the same problems, too: The algorithm had been expanded until it had a lot of bugs, which were then patched in a way that only caused further

complications.

So I decided to share just a little bit of knowledge from my student days on the parts that seemed to be causing them the most trouble.

“Miss Doa, about this line...”

I was sure it was all right if I meddled just a tiny bit.

Thus, I spent a few enjoyable hours until the sun went down and then stopped by the sewing workshop on the way home to help finish the last of the void suits.

The owner complained about the overtime, but I managed to get her through it with the help of some dragonspring liquor.

She contacted Jia about the order using a small bird-type pseudo-spirit made with Spirit Magic, so I left the rest in their hands and headed back to the tree house.



Sunbeams streamed in through the tree house window, inviting me to awaken.

I was still half-asleep when the gentle scent of miso soup reached my nose. My “Keen Hearing” skill let me know that Lulu and Liza were working and chatting downstairs.

“...Morning already?”

I’d slept a lot deeper than I’d expected, perhaps because I’d managed to take care of the pending problem of making the void suits.

Letting my eyes wander, I saw Tama, sleeping curled up in a ball on my stomach, and Pochi, who was asleep holding hands with Mia. The pleasant sensation on the left side of my body was probably Nana.

Mia had been staying at her parents’ home for the past few days, but she must have crashed here last night.

The four of them were wearing a new creation of mine: *kigurumi* pajamas.

I’d made each of them in accordance with their personalities and tastes: a cat,

a dog, a rabbit, and a chick.

“Good morniiing, all and one!”

Arisa flew into the bedroom in exceptionally high spirits.

Ever since we’d arrived in the Bolenan Forest, she’d been waking up early like a kid on vacation.

And since she was eating well and playing around all day, every day, a slight plumpness had returned to her cheeks and stomach.

I considered having her go on a diet, but her health seemed just fine for her age, so there was probably no need for that.

“Good morning, Arisa. Shouldn’t that be ‘one and all’?”

“I’ve heard it both ways. Anyway, we have the morning off today, right? Let’s go see the trampoline mushrooms or hunt for cured ham!”

Arisa threw the window blinds open gleefully.

I could more or less picture the former, but I wasn’t sure how one would “hunt for cured ham.”

Was there a cured ham tree in the Bolenan Forest or something?

...The scary part was that it wouldn’t be that surprising.

I checked the schedule tab in my menu.

“Today’s no good. We told the elf teachers we’d go mountain-stream fishing with them.”

“Ohhh, right. Guess the ham hunt will have to wait till next time, then.”

Arisa looked disappointed.

She seemed really intent on this cured-ham-hunt thing, so I made a note of it at the top of my list of activities.

“Good morniiing?”

“Yaaawn, sir.”

Tama stretched out in her cat pajamas, and Pochi rubbed her eyes and yawned widely in her dog pajamas.

Mia and Nana were awake, too.

“Satou.” Mia smiled sleepily. Despite her rabbit pajamas, she was purring and rubbing her face against me like a cat.

“Master.” Apparently envious of Mia’s gesture, Nana started imitating her.

“Me tooooo?”

“Pochi wants to cuddle, too, sir.”

“M-me too, then!”

In the end, all of them dove on top of me, and we ended up tumbling back into bed.

I guess peaceful mornings like this weren’t so bad.

After a light breakfast, we went to the mountain stream in the Bolenan Forest with our elven teachers. Today, we weren’t training until the afternoon.

“Big caaatch?”

“Tama’s amazing, sir! I won’t lose, either, sir!”



Tama's and Pochi's cheerful voices rose over the soft burbling of the stream.

Arisa was wearing a large straw hat, a red long-sleeve shirt under a white T-shirt, and jeans-style pants.

It was probably some kind of cosplay, but I didn't know who she was supposed to be.

"Mm. Big one."

Mia reeled in a large rainbow trout-like fish called a Bolenan Large Trout.

Seeing that, Arisa turned a little frantic.

"Oh dear, even Mia's gone and gotten ahead of little old me!"

Her strange phrasing probably had something to do with her cosplay.

She soon got bored of it, though, and went back to her regular manner of speaking.

"Maaan, now master and I are the only losers left!"

Excuse you.

If I could just catch a single fish, I could get the "Fishing" skill, and... No, I guess that wouldn't be fair.

I quickly put aside such wicked schemes and simply devoted my heart to the melody of the stream and the quiet forest.

"A bite!"

Arisa's shriek brought me back to reality just as I was about to become one with nature.

There wasn't anything pulling on my fishing rod.

Arisa must have caught something.

"Whoo-hoooo!" She seemed even more excitable than usual.

The fish looked like a red haddock of some kind and was called a Leprechaun River Cod.

It was nearly a foot long. According to the elves, it was omnivorous and thus

not well suited to being eaten raw, but it was delicious if pickled or dried. I bet it would taste great with sake.

Then, at long last, I finally got a bite as well.

I pulled the rod up with a light snap and landed a tiny, tiny loach.

> Skill Acquired: “Fishing”

“Won’t lose next time!”

The rest of the group praised me, but Goya snarled unhappily and ran away.

I hadn’t even known he was there or that we were competing again... Too bad. He could’ve joined us for lunch.

Upstream, where Goya had run off to, the samurai elf seemed to be up to something new.

“Prettyyy?”

“It’s a bug made of feathers and string, sir.”

“Watch and learn, you lot.”

The elves had crafted bait and were skillfully manipulating their rods to attract the fish.

“Looks reeeal?”

“The fish fell for it, sir!”

Tama and Pochi were so impressed that they did a little dance.

“...Fake bait? How very wicked.”

Miss Poa looked vexed.

Maybe she didn’t like that her student Pochi was more interested in the samurai elf’s technique than in her own.

“I believe using a lance is still faster than fishing.”

With that, Liza handed a significant bundle of river fish to Lulu.

She had been downriver with her teacher, the spear master Mr. Gurgapoya.

If we really wanted to be efficient, it’d be faster to just catch the fish with

Magic Hand, but that would take the fun out of it.

We'd reeled in a decent amount, so I salted a fish for each person and roasted them over a fire on skewers.

This was an important part of river fishing, really.

For the main course, I made hot pot with miso, fish balls, and fresh wild vegetables. The younger kids had caught some river crabs, so I cut them in half and added them to the pot.

It wound up being a nice, rustic meal, taking me back to the survival camp I did as a kid during summer vacation.

"Mm! It's a little salty, but that's exactly how grilled fish skewers ought to be!"

Arisa chomped on her skewer happily.

"Arisa, you've left the head and the guts. They're perfectly tasty. If you leave them, a waste ghost will come and haunt you," Liza scolded.

"Awww, what? But the worms we used for bait are in there..."

"What about it?"

Liza clearly didn't understand Arisa's modern-girl sensibilities.

Luckily, Nana and Tama rescued her from her plight.

"Master, the watermelon has reached the perfect temperature for eating, I report."

Nana was carrying two watermelons that had been chilling in the river.

Then, while Liza was distracted, Tama ate the remains of Arisa's fish in two quick bites. "Thanks," Arisa whispered.

"Don't worry, be happyyy?" Tama responded cheerfully and dashed off to get some watermelon.

Judging by her tail, which was sticking straight up, she seemed to be proud of herself.

"Master, the watermelon is delicious, I confirm."

“Thank you, Nana.”

Nana’s face was covered in juice from the watermelon, so I wiped it with a handkerchief before biting into the slice she brought me.

Then, as I reached up to remove the seeds from my mouth...

Ichirou! You must not eat like such a lady!

A memory flashed unexpectedly through my mind.

When did that happen?

On the balcony at the shrine next to my childhood friend’s house, a little girl with green hair smiled at me.

Her face was shadowed, so I couldn’t see her very well.

One must spit the seeds out like so if he wishes to properly enjoy the summer of his youth!

The summer breeze gently shifted her silver hair.

It must have been a memory of a summer vacation from my childhood, then... Or was it?

My childhood friend had black hair.

Then whose memory was this...?

“Master?”

A willowy hand tugged me back to reality.

“Sorry, Nana. I think I was daydreaming a little.”

I stood up and stretched to shake off the strange sense of déjà vu. Maybe I was just exhausted.

Since this was basically an adult summer vacation, I should really try to relax and enjoy it more.

“Ahhh, there they are!”

A voice like a spring breeze caressed my ears.

Turning around, I saw Aialize and Lua stepping out of a fairy ring.

They'd been so busy recently that it had been five days since I'd last seen them.

"Thank you, Satou!"

Aialize rushed up to me and grabbed my hands in both of hers, shaking them up and down.

"Kea and Kiya told me everything! They said it was all thanks to you that the void suits were ready earlier than expected!"

"Oh, don't mention it."

Just seeing Aialize's smile was thanks enough for me.

"Mr. Satou, about the potions you gave Jia..."

Lua explained that the energy drink-style nutritional supplement potions turned out to be very popular.

"...If possible, we would love it if you could mass-produce them at our alchemy workshop..."

Darn. This was poorly timed, considering I'd just resolved to enjoy my vacation more.

Maybe I could just give the recipe to the elf alchemists and let them handle the rest...?

"Please, Satou?"

"Of course. It would be my pleasure."

I tossed my reservations out the window and took Aialize's hand instead.

"Guilty."

"Why, you! Take this—Sunshine of Juuudgment!"

Urk, that's bright.

The girls had redirected some sunlight right into my eyes with a reflector. I had the "Light Intensity Adjustment" and "Self-Healing" skills, so all it did was blind me a little, but that could've damaged the eyesight of an ordinary person; I'd have to scold them later.

Mia and Arisa were using the magic-reflecting prototypes I'd made with Kenea worm thread and the silver hide of the whales. If all they were going to do was reflect light with them, they should've just used a hand mirror.

I moved into the shade, where their reflected-light attack couldn't reach me.

"Are you all right, Satou?"

"Yes, of course."

I smiled at Aialize, who was kind enough to worry about me, then made arrangements with Lua for the potion producing.

"It's no use hiding in the shade! Light can reach even the dark side of the moon!"

"Mm. Satellite."

The two of them worked together to bounce the light into the shadows.

It reminded me of an old sci-fi anime where they reflected a giant laser attack, so I took a reflective sheet out of my pocket and bounced the light back at them for just a moment.

"My eyes! My eyyyyyes!"

Ignoring Arisa's dramatic reaction, I watched Aialize and Lua leave, their business here finished.

Due to circumstances at the transmutation workshop, my little apprenticeship would be taking place the next day.

That left all of today to enjoy myself to the fullest and spend some quality family time together!

...Oh, but first I had better scold those two for their little light-reflecting prank.



"Is this the nutritional supplement potion I've heard so much about?"

"It's sweet. You didn't just add sugar to a recovery potion, did you?"

When I arrived at the transmutation workshop per Miss Aialize's request, I

was met with two familiar elves.

One was Tuya, the alchemist who'd given away all that information when I first went to the underground city with Mia; the other was his master, one of the Four Shogi Kings of Whatever, Miss Aea.

"No, there's no sugar in it, I'm sorry to say. The main ingredients are yellorange fruit from the Mountain-Trees and gabo fruit."

I handed the pair a recipe booklet, which I'd put together in Elvish.

It had simple illustrations along with step-by-step instructions, so I shouldn't need to explain too much.

"Tuya, go get the materials from the workshop."

"We don't have any gabo fruit."

"Satou, do you have any you can spare? If it's payment you want, help yourself to any materials from the warehouse."

"There's no need for that. I have plenty of gabo fruits to go around."

I had already transferred some gabo fruits to the Garage Bag in advance, so I brought them out.

Tuya returned with the yellorange fruits floating behind him thanks to Practical Magic, and together we got to work.

We used a magic tool of my own devising to grate the fruits.

"Hmm. So the top of the grater is fixed to this pedestal, then the gabo fruit is attached to this part that moves it back and forth across the grater... Quite ingenious."

Ignoring his master, Aea, who was obsessing over the magic tool, Tuya set about grating the fruits with an ordinary formulation tool.

"Satou, contest!"

"Perfect timing, Goya. Help us grate these gabo fruits, please. Whoever grates them the finest wins."

"Mm. Got it."

Tuya seemed to know how to manage Goya pretty well and smoothly redirected him into helping out with the labor.

He didn't seem to realize he'd been tricked, and I certainly didn't mind the extra hands.

"When we're done, we mix it into the boiled yellorange fruit juice, correct?"

"Yes, just add it a little at a time until it's nice and thick."

I watched Tuya work diligently.

When the elves' Transmutation Tablet was activated, it formed a transparent magic frame, and the ingredients within floated in midair. The whole thing was surrounded by a mysterious sparkle throughout the process.

It was beautiful—and much more precise than human alchemy tools.

My recipe was meant for a human Transmutation Tablet, but it turned out that these techniques had generally been adapted from the elves, so their tablets were a much more efficient version.

"Does this look right for the settings?"

"Yes, I think that should work splendidly."

From here on, the process was similar to making any ordinary magic potion, just with slightly different settings.

The two of them were well versed in alchemy, so they had no problem figuring it out.

In the back of the workshop was the same extra-large Transmutation Tablet setup I'd seen in the magic-tool workshop, but they explained that they would be using the smaller kind until they got a feel for the recipe.

Worn out from all the gabo-fruit grating, Goya was stretched out unmoving on the couch. Perhaps we could give him one of the recovery potions later.

"This is easier than I expected."

"Fool!"

Tuya looked a little let down until his master bonked him on the head with a staff.

“That’s because Satou made the recipe so easy to understand. Besides, only a human could have come up with this potion!”

I was a little confused.

Why was it “only a human” and not “only Satou” specifically?

“What do you mean, boss?” Tuya asked, evidently as confused as I was.

“When we elves get tired, we simply rest until we’ve recovered. But humans have shorter life spans, so sometimes they need to keep working even if it requires the help of a potion like this.”

That made sense. If I were going to live for hundreds of years, I guess I wouldn’t be in a rush most of the time, either.

...*Huh?* Then why were Miss Jia and the others using potions to overwork themselves, and why did they need those void suits in such a hurry?

“This is remarkable.”

“Quite a collection, isn’t it?”

Leaving the rest of the potion production to Tuya, the master of the workshop was now showing me around their archives, which boasted many of the elves’ potion recipes and advanced research notes.

The shelves were stacked all the way up to the ceiling, some fifteen feet off the floor.

“It’s not a library, so you can’t take anything with you, but you’re welcome to read whatever you like. The banned books have been moved elsewhere, so you don’t need to worry about that. Just don’t teach these recipes to other humans, please.”

When I asked why, she explained that it would threaten the “diversity of recipes.”

But if I developed new recipes that utilized the knowledge or ideas I found here, I was welcome to spread them as much as I liked.

The master gave me a passkey to the archive, which was designed to look like a dancing frog, so I could easily come here and read while the others were

sleeping.

“What sort of things are in the banned section, if I may ask?”

“Special recipes like elixirs, youth potions, cure-alls, and so on. They all require nigh-unobtainable ingredients like blood gems, giant monster fish liver, the scales of grown dragons, and so on. Or otherwise rare materials like Holytree Stone. There are other forbidden potions, too, like demonic potions and necromancy elixirs and such, so you mustn’t make those.”

The rare ones sounded rather intriguing. Even without the instructions, I’d love to find out what kind of potions there were and what ingredients they required.

That way, I could gather the ingredients and bring them here to get them made if I really needed them.

Youth potions, in particular, sounded like something I’d like to stock up on as soon as possible.

I knew it sounded selfish, but I wanted the head priestess of Tenion Temple to live as long as possible, and not just because she could revive my comrades if necessary.

At any rate, the ordinary archives contained potions like aphrodisiacs, stimulants, and other such things.

Finding this unusual, I asked Master Aea about it, and she said they were intended for married couples who were struggling to have children.

Normally, most couples conceived within the first hundred years or so, so these potions were rarely necessary, the master noted cheerfully.

As usual, I couldn’t quite keep up with the elves’ strange sense of time.

There were a lot of potions I couldn’t make with my Transmutation Tablet; when I worried about this aloud, they gave me an old one that no one was using. Elves were quite generous.

The actual library was in the lower part of the World Tree, comprised mostly of books from elves who were sleeping in the mystery area and those who had simply run out of space at home.

I'd have to get permission from Aialize or the elders to go there. Then I could bring Arisa and the others to browse around.



"Space is much freer than you youngsters think."

About half a month had passed since we started living in the tree house when we got the chance to hear an elder elf give a lecture on Space Magic.

It was strange to hear such elderly-sounding words coming from the mouth of someone who looked like a young boy.

His white-robed elf assistants and apprentices stood behind him as silently as statues, giving off a rather intimidating air.

As usual, Goya had shown up, too, but quickly fled when he saw the elder and his entourage.

"Y'see the holes in that there box? Put your face close and have a peek inside."

We took turns looking through the large holes in the box.

The box on the outside was a cube about three feet around, yet inside it was easily a hundred square feet of space.

"Ah! Master's face is so far away!"

Pochi, who was looking through the hole on the other side of the box, waved to me excitedly. For some reason, it sounded like her voice overlapped on itself, though that might have just been my imagination.

Maybe it was because the distances between us inside and outside the box were so different.

I waved back at her, pulled away from the hole, and then looked at Pochi.

Her tail was wagging away as Liza held her up.

"Is this Space Expansion?"

"That's right, lad." The elder elf nodded. "Magic Bags and the like are made with a subversion of the Space Expansion spell called Garage."

Space Expansion constantly used magic power, so it wasn't well suited to being sustained for long periods of time.

The Garage spell created a subspace proportionate in size to the amount of magic initially used to invoke it; this magic then circulated internally through the subspace it created, meaning that it required only a minimal amount of magic to maintain.

Opening and shutting the gate required magic, which was used to restore any magic that had been consumed in the subspace.

The "Item Box" skill had a similar effect as Garage, with the additional feature of an inventory list that the skill user could view at any time.

The "Inventory" skill that heroes used worked in basically the same way as well, but since the subspace itself was created by the goddess Parion, it could store a virtually infinite amount of items.

...But my "Storage" skill didn't use magic power at all, so how did that work?

Maybe it just happened to have similar functions but actually worked in a totally different way.

"Now we will use a Holytree Stone to fix the Garage spell to a bag."

The elder elf reached into the pouch around his waist and pulled out a sapphire-like gem.

"Prettyyy?"

"So sparkly, sir."

Tama and Pochi gaped.

"Lady Aaze has given me permission to use a Holytree Stone for thee, Satou, but as they are quite valuable, we shall only use one."

Hmm. Considering how important they are, maybe we shouldn't use one at all?

From what I'd gathered during our stay in the elf village so far, Holytree Stones had a lot of awfully important uses.

So I suggested using a core to make a Magic Bag instead.

“I have heard tell that humans use high-grade monster cores as a substitute for Holytree Stone, but not only will this reduce the amount of space it creates, the tool can break in less than a thousand years if left unmaintained. Thus, I cannot recommend such an inferior product.”

The elder elf shook his head, but a thousand years of effectiveness seemed fine to me.

It might have seemed inadequate to the elves, but with a human’s life span, I’d say even fifty years was plenty long enough.

“...Well, if you insist, I shall not argue, lad. We shall have Hiya prepare the necessary cores.”

“What grade of cores might be required? We’ve gathered plenty on our travels, so I’d be happy to provide them if they’re usable.”

I had a good store of monster cores, so there was no need to trouble my chant teacher, Hishirotoya, about it.

I showed the elder elf the grading scale that human alchemists used for cores and asked him what kind would work.

The ones I had on hand from level-30-and-up hydras, wyverns, and so on turned out to be a perfect fit.

In our travels through the Muno Barony and from the old capital through the Black Dragon Mountains, I’d gathered a pretty good amount. There were more than enough for each of my group members.

This way, we could also make a large bag to carry Nana’s giant shield and a backpack for transporting game that we wouldn’t have to worry about dirtying with blood.

“Now, then... Aside from the parts that require Space Magic, my apprentices can take care of the rest of the work. I must go and help Lady Aaze, so once I have explained a certain amount of the procedure, I should like to leave it to my helpers and come back only for the finishing touches. Is that all right?”

The elder looked apologetic, but I was the one putting him out during this busy time, so I wound up feeling guilty.

“That’s more than enough—thank you. Is it all right if I watch your apprentices work so that I can learn?”

“Indeed, that was my intent from the start. Please feel free.”

The elder nodded generously, but I saw the elves behind him frowning a little, so I decided I would go alone to watch the work.

That was five days ago.

I took time off from training to go to the workshop where the Magic Bags were being made, and I helped out the apprentices while I learned their techniques.

At first, the apprentice elves were distant with me, but when I readjusted their magic tools to function more efficiently, they opened up a little.

By this point, they had accepted me enough that they invited me along on their tea breaks.

Incidentally, Goya had stopped showing up after the first day. According to Arisa and the others, he was instead going to the training grounds whenever Mia was there.

“Satou, would you mind fine-tuning the Transmutation Tablet?”

“Wait. Me first.”

“Not so fast! I need Satou to help process the monster stomachs we’re using for the inner walls of these bags!”

I helped the elves with each of their requests in turn, feeling a bit like the office gofer.

“You’re pretty popular, Satou.” Hishirotoya teased me when he came to see how I was doing, but I couldn’t say I was looking to be popular with guys, pretty as these ones might be.

The “inner walls” the last elf mentioned were what we used to form the interior of the Space Magic subspace.

A subspace tended to have small gaps and such, so having a physical wall helped keep it together and protected the objects stored inside from any

negative effects of being stored within an unstable subspace.

Monster stomachs were the best material for this inner wall, so I provided the necessary amount of hydra and wyvern stomachs from my Storage.

Like the “Item Box” skill, Magic Bags couldn’t hold living creatures. Unlike the former, however, it turned out that this was a deliberate prohibition put on Magic Bags during the creation process.

In the past, living things placed inside Magic Bags sometimes died of lack of oxygen or tore through the inner wall and escaped into subspace.

So setting up Magic Bags so they couldn’t hold living beings was a method of avoiding such accidents.

That being said, the Magic Bags we were making this time included permission to contain magic-made creatures, like golems.

Golems didn’t need oxygen and wouldn’t rampage inside the bag without orders.

“You’re amazing, Satou. On your first day, just seeing the beginnings of the control device surprised you, but now you’re using projection and sealing devices and even transcribing magic circuits without a problem.”

“That’s only because you’ve all guided me so well,” I responded as the elves admired my work.

I was being a little modest, but it was true: The elves here seemed to like teaching people, and they’d helped me learn a lot.

The devices in question were used to incorporate control circuits into the cores.

I was indeed surprised the first time I saw the magic circuits carved directly into cores that had been “formatted” using a special device. That must be how the tiny detailed magic circuits I saw in the multi-legged golem before were made, too.

As I was reflecting on all this, the elder elf came into the workshop. He was here to do the finishing touches today.

“Hmm. These are better made than usual.”

The elder elf inspected the prepared materials and nodded, looking satisfied. “Your skills have improved, you lot.”

“That’s all thanks to Satou.”

“Mm. Talented.”

“He helps us out with even the most tiring work, and his ‘Magic Manipulation’ is nearly as good as yours, master.”

For some reason, the apprentices all hurried to shift the praise over to me. I was quick to say “Oh, that’s not true” like a proper Japanese person, but the elves scolded me that this was “unnecessary.” I was glad that my help had been useful, but they didn’t need to flatter me that much.

Once this little scene was over, I watched the elder elf and his aides finish the process.

“...■■■■■■■ **Garage** *Kakunouko.*”

“...■■ **Set Rune Conferment** *Jutsu Shiki Kotei Fuyo.*”

“...■■ **Preserve Rune Conferment** *Jutsu Shiki Hoji Fuyo.*”

“...■■ **Cyclify Magic** *Maryoku Junkanka.*”

Once the elder had invoked his spell, the apprentices activated shorter spells one by one.

I made a mental copy of the four spells with “Parallel Thoughts,” then noted them all in the memo tab of my menu while I watched the elder elf work.

“Now we must set this in place while the magic is stable.”

The apprentices’ spells were just stopgap measures until the magic device could be activated.

One of the assistant elves used Magic Hand to put the device inside the Garage.

“Activate.”

Once this was finished, the elder elf said a key word in Elvish, and the magic device activated and fused with the walls of the Garage. With this, the Magic Bag was complete.

Great. I managed to memorize the steps and the chants.

Once I learned how to chant properly, I should be able to reproduce the whole process.

Just imagining a Magic Bag made with the enormous stomach of a whale was a thrilling prospect.

As I was contemplating this, the elves moved on to the next bag.

Since I still couldn't chant, it was frustrating not to be able to help.

"Is this the last one?"

"Affirmative."

The elder elf's voice sounded tired.

Even if he was just doing the finishing touches, making ten Magic Bags in one day must have been pretty exhausting.

All I could do was offer intermediate magic recovery potions and nutritional supplement potions to help him get through it.

...Were my potions the reason he couldn't stop partway through?

No, I must be imagining things.

"The rest is in your hands."

I bowed respectfully to the elder elf as he left the workshop.

"A pink flowerrr!"

"Mine has a yellow paw mark, sir."

"Mm. Rabbit."

"The chick design on mine is the winner, I insist."

The girls were showing one another the embroidered designs I'd put on each of their Magic Bags at the sewing workshop.

They were modeled after a cute pochette; the flap could be unbuttoned, allowing for large things to be put in or taken out.

The sewing workshop had plenty of dyes, so the younger girls and Nana chose

bright colors.

Arisa went for a dramatic black base with a red line, while Lulu's and Liza's bags were a sophisticated brown.

The main body of the bag was already complete, so it took only a few minutes to sew everything up.

"User registration now."

"...User registration?" I repeated.

"Required."

The elf assistant nodded.

Just as the name implied, this feature restricted the opening and closing of the Magic Bag to the individual registered as its owner.

That seemed useful, so I thought maybe I could add the same feature to the girls' weapons and any dangerous magic tools. Unlike Holy Swords that were gifted from gods, the ones I made had no restrictions on who could use them.

In addition to this type, which linked the magic tool to its registered user, there was also a kind that utilized a magic tool as a key. The key I'd been given for the alchemy archives was one example of this.

Since I wanted to try it, I decided to use that kind for the game-carrying bag, which everyone would be sharing.

Using a key-style ring would be fashionable, too.

"Now our Fairy Packs are finally finished!"

Arisa struck a triumphant pose with her completed bag. Not very ladylike.

"Fairy Pack?" The assistant elf blinked.

"Well, yeah." Arisa smiled confidently. "'Magic Bag' sounds kind of dull, since the elves made them for us and all. 'Fairy Pack' has a much nicer ring to it, don't you think?"

"Understood."

The assistant elf was the only one to respond, but the other apprentices were

all smiling, so I guess they had no objections.

Thus, our group's Magic Bags were renamed Fairy Packs.



"Is Satou here?!"

The peaceful mood in the Magic Bag workshop was interrupted when someone came bursting through the door.

It was the engineer who'd promised to teach me how to make wands back at the magic-tool studio.

"Yes, right here."

Something seemed to be the matter, so I raised a hand and walked over to the entrance.

"Sorry, but can you come with me, please? Lady Aaze is—"

"Yes, of course! Where do I need to go?!"

I hadn't seen Aialize in a few days. As soon as her name was mentioned, my composure went out the window.

I zipped over to him with "Warp" and charged to the fairy ring before he could recover from his surprise.

Wait for me, Aialize! I'm coming!

The Void

Satou here. There's a saying about always tapping a stone bridge to test it before you cross it, but sometimes there's just no time for that kind of caution. If you ask me, there are times where you just have to sprint across a mud bridge and hope for the best.

"What's the matter, Satou?"

When I arrived out of breath at the observatory in the top part of the World Tree, Aialize was there waving at me with a carefree smile.

I almost collapsed with relief, but I managed to stay upright by sending some magic into my knees.

Now that I was a bit less frantic, I looked around.

The observatory was basically a park covered in a transparent dome about three hundred feet in diameter.

Beyond the dome stretched a vast starry sky. Not the kind of thing you'd expect to see in the middle of the day.

In other words, the view outside the dome must be outer space.

Several thick branches reached into the dark outside the dome. For some reason, they looked more like roots than anything.

I didn't run all the way up here, of course. The dryad's teleportation covered most of the distance.

"I heard that you asked for me, Lady Aialize, so I came running, but..."

I trailed off before I could finish as I approached Miss Aialize.

Her magic and stamina in my AR display were on the verge of running out. Evidently her smile hadn't been carefree so much as exhausted.

"No need to look so worried. I'll be better soon."

“Please rest a little longer, Lady Aaze. I’ll explain things to Mr. Satou.”

I gave Aialize a nutritional supplement and magic recovery potions from my pocket, then listened to Lua’s explanation.

“I apologize for bringing you out all this way. You see...”

As the shrine maiden spoke, I watched Aialize’s recovery on the AR out of the corner of my eye.

“...and electrical discharge from the World Tree has left many elves stranded in the void.”

Electrical discharge? The defense mechanism that was strong enough to repel even Hei Long the black dragon?

We were in a different area from the ground or the lower parts of the World Tree, so I hurriedly used the Search Entire Map spell to get more information.

The area of this map extended out in a spherical radius of several dozen miles from the observatory.

I checked the dots signifying elves on the map.

Quite a few of them were seriously injured, but none seemed to be fatally so.

...Huh?

There were countless red markers denoting enemies in the void.

And yet, perhaps because of the light, I couldn’t see any enemies out there.

According to the map information, the enemies were called Evil Jellies, and they ranged in level from 20 to 40. With an average level of 30, in theory they weren’t much of a threat, but there were so many of them.

Roughly ten thousand, in fact.

What a ridiculous number, especially for anything other than demi-goblins raised on gabo fruit. No wonder the elves were having such a hard time.

These jellyfish-like creatures had the race-specific skills “Absorb,” “Synchronize,” and “Chain Rampage.”

Looking closely, I saw that their category was not **monster** but **cryptid**.

Fortunately, the Evil Jellies didn't seem to be interested in the elves. They simply stuck to the branches of the World Tree and didn't move an inch.

If they weren't going to prevent us from rescuing the elves in need, we could probably just deal with them later.

"Are there any extra void suits?"

"No, none ready to be re-dispatched right now."

Good thing I had a spare one in my Storage, then.

It didn't have the life-support magic circuit yet, but it was perfectly airtight, so I should be able to just use oxygen from Storage.

Fortunately, I had plenty of that as a by-product of making a hydrogen air balloon to cross the Black Dragon Mountains.

"All right. I'll go rescue them."

"D-don't be ridiculous, Mr. Satou. We called you here to ask for help repairing the magic tools for use in the void, not to send you on a reckless suicide mission!"

Seeing me pull the void suit out of my Garage Bag, Lua the shrine maiden hurried to stop me.

But wasn't there a general rule that disaster relief had to take place within the first seventy-two hours?

I didn't know if that was applicable in a parallel world, but this "void" basically seemed to be outer space, so the time limit had to be short.

Besides, some of the elves in need of help were people I'd become friendly with during our stay.

"We can't save lives by sitting around repairing things."

"But it's too dangerous... We don't even have any light ships that are functioning properly."

A light ship was an elf vehicle that could traverse space, similar to Hayato's dimensional submarine, the *Jules Verne*.

As Lua continued to try to dissuade me, a gentle hand touched her shoulder.

It was Aialize.

“It’s all right. I’m feeling much better. Satou of the Shiga Kingdom, though the journey will be a dangerous one, will you accompany me?”

“Yes, of course.”

Aialize looked guilty, but I took the hand she extended at once.

“I’m a little low on spirits, though. Could I ask you to unleash your spirit light, Satou?”

“As you wish, milady.”

I was a little embarrassed with myself for saying such a corny line, but I managed with the help of my “Poker Face” skill.

“Goodness, spirits are gathering from the atmosphere and the World Tree at an incredible rate... Thank you, Satou. These spirits will be more than enough.”

With that, Aialize murmured a word or two, and a glowing green wind rose around her, carrying both of us into the air.

Despite her claim that she’d recovered, her face still looked pale.

“We’re going out there. Be careful not to leave my side.”

Huh?

Aialize’s hand touched the dome, and it shifted around her.

Apparently, it was more like a mucous membrane than glass, and it was about seven feet thick.

It didn’t come inside Aialize’s wind barrier, so I didn’t know what it felt like.

Within a few seconds, we passed through the membrane and into the void.

I didn’t feel weightless, so we must not be as far out as I thought.

I was able to breathe inside the wind barrier, but if we wanted to rescue everyone quickly, it was probably better to act separately.

Reluctantly, I let go of Aialize’s soft hand and used “Quick Change” to put on the void suit. Since it didn’t have a control unit, I would just have to use my own magic and the oxygen from Storage.

“Let’s split up to rescue everyone. I’ll go this way.”

“W-wait!”

I used “Skyrunning” to leave Aialize’s barrier.

Before I could heed Aialize’s frantic warning, the electricity silently surrounding the World Tree’s branches crackled to life.

Aialize was saying something, but I couldn’t hear her, since we were in a vacuum.

Wanting to protect her, I produced some metal objects from Storage around myself as makeshift lightning rods.

Then I used Magic Hand to move them so that the lightning wouldn’t reach her.

In the next instant, a heavy electric shock assaulted my senses.

Oof.

Yeah, that hurt.

I frantically turned my “Pain Resistance” skill back on.

Those little electrons sure packed a punch.

“Satou, don’t be so reckless!”

A soft sensation soothed my body through the void suit.

Aialize was embracing me.

Strangely, as soon as she came close, the electric shock stopped.

“The World Tree is on high alert right now, so if it detects a foreign object, it’ll try to eliminate it.”

She explained that the World Tree considered high elves to be part of itself, so it wouldn’t try to attack one.

Regular elves were considered subcomponents, too, so they wouldn’t be attacked as long as they didn’t make any careless moves.

...Huh?

Why wasn't the World Tree eliminating the Evil Jellies on its branches, then?

That question would have to wait, however.

Rescuing the elves was more important right now.

"Lady Aialize, please allow me to guide us toward the most seriously injured elves first."

"Yes, please do."

...I hadn't expected her to understand and agree to that so readily.

Aialize moved the wind barrier in accordance with my directions.

"There are two inside that multi-legged golem."

We landed on the misshapen frame of a charred golem, and I produced the Holy Sword Durandal from Storage to cut through the exterior.

Inside were Mr. Kiya and Miss Doa from the magic-tool workshop.

"S-Satou?"

"Lady Aialize and I are here to rescue you."

I used the Water Magic spell Aqua Heal to fix their injuries while extracting them with the help of Magic Hand.

"Satou, can you recover the control tablet of the golem?"

"All right."

Since we had other people to rescue, I cut the tablet free a bit roughly with Durandal.

"Got it. Lady Aialize, let's go to the branch up there next."

"Okay. And also, you can call me Aaze if you'd like. It's much easier to say."

"Very well, erm... Miss Aaze."

For some reason, I hadn't been this embarrassed to call a girl by her nickname since middle school, despite the fact that I'd used nicknames for women in college and at work all the time.



“Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. We appreciate your assistance.”

“Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. We admire your dedication.”

“Satou of the Shiga Kingdom. We...”

The day after the rescue in the void, I was in the meeting room at the base of the World Tree, receiving the thanks of the elders.

In light of my help with the rescue and the other services I’d been providing, they had decided to grant me access to the entire World Tree, including the observatory.

They even offered me the rank of an honorary elder, but I politely declined.

I didn’t think I was old enough to be considered an “elder” by beings who lived hundreds of years.

I received a catalog of extra rewards, including special materials and textiles that could be found only in the elf village, as well as other valuable resources.

Although, to be honest, I thought including World Tree leaves and sap was a little bit much.

My alchemy books listed those as too rare to acquire even for someone with a high rank or castle of their own.

At any rate, once that was over, one of the elders guided me to a separate room.

“Done already, Satou?”

“Yes, thank you.”

I was greeted there by Miss Aaze, the shrine maiden Lua, and Jia, the “gardener” who’d come to the sewing workshop to pick up the void suits before.

“So may I presume this is about the situation I saw yesterday?”

Miss Aaze nodded.

“As you’ve probably realized already, we’re trying to combat the parasitic Evil Jellies that have latched on to the World Tree.”

They must want me to exterminate them, then.

I'd seen the Evil Jellies only from a distance and through the wind barrier during the rescue mission, but they looked to me like translucent jellyfish that contained sparkling gusts of Wind Magic. The elves seemed to call them "jellyfish," too, so I'd just use that name from now on.

If the only problem were the electric discharge of the World Tree, then I could probably just make an insulator suit and go out there to make quick work of them.

But when I suggested this, the elves quickly shot it down.

"If it were that simple, we wouldn't be struggling so much," Lua said.

"The electric shocks also hurt the branches of the World Tree itself," Jia explained. "The thick ones closest to the trunk are all right, but the thinner emerald branches can break very easily."

From what I was told in the observatory, the emerald branches of the World Tree were important branches that collected magic from the aether that flowed through the void.

Our rescue mission took place near the roots, so I hadn't actually seen the emerald branches yet.

"So," Lua concluded, "what we'd like to ask you to do is help repair the multi-legged golems that have been damaged in the incident and produce more void suits."

"And if you have any suggestions for exterminating the jellies, we'd love to hear them," Jia added.

I agreed to help with the former right away and said I'd do some thinking on the latter.

First, there were a few things I needed to confirm.

"Why exactly are the jellyfish attacking the World Tree in the first place?"

"They use their tentacles to eat the mana that flows through the branches."

I nodded at Aaze's explanation.

If nearly ten thousand jellyfish were sucking up the World Tree's mana, it could easily cause a shortage down on the ground.

Lua contributed some additional information.

"Some of them lay eggs on the branches, too. Worse yet, the viscous substance that protects the eggs pollutes the sap and weakens the World Tree."

So the jellyfishes' goals were simply eating and breeding, then.

"So why doesn't the World Tree's electrical shock system get rid of the jellyfish?"

"The jellyfish seem to have some way of making the World Tree think they are a part of it, not a foreign object."

She added that they'd already attempted to correct this or put the World Tree to sleep so that the electric discharge would be suspended, but to no avail.

"And since the area around the jellyfish creates a magic vacuum, we can't use spells to put them to sleep or restrain them."

Furthermore, since it was impossible to maneuver in the void without magic, void suits or airtight golems were necessary to approach the jellyfish.

Unlike regular magic, magic tools and devices that used Holytree Stone still worked near the jellyfish, although their rate of magic-power consumption rose drastically.

"We have been using magic potions to put the jellies to sleep, then using golems to cut off and restrain the tentacles that are attached to the World Tree's branches."

Aaze and others who could use Spirit Magic had been gathering all of the restrained jellyfish in one place.

As I understood it, a pseudo-spirit created by a master could exist near the jellyfish, at least for a while.

"We planned to use that method to slowly but surely eliminate the jellyfish, but..."

"We didn't know that some of them had eggs."

Lua and Jia sighed in unison.

As it turned out, if a jellyfish that was bearing eggs was eliminated, the nearby jellyfish would send the World Tree into high-alert mode, as was the case yesterday.

And if more than a certain amount of jellyfish were destroyed or isolated, the rest would consume large amounts of the World Tree's branches to multiply at an explosive rate.

The jellyfish also multiplied in a wide-range chain reaction, so if they weren't all eliminated at once, they would end up producing even more than the amount that was destroyed.

A lot of this was presented as secondhand information, so I asked why.

"Other World Trees have also been infected with Evil Jellies," Lua responded. These other trees were taking even more damage than the one in the Bolenan Forest.

"According to the records, the Evil Jellies have always appeared once every thousand years or so on the flow of the aether, but it was only ever a handful of them at a time."

Maybe something had happened farther up the aether stream that caused this huge amount of jellyfish to appear, or maybe a threat caused them to flee in large numbers.

I couldn't help wondering about it, but that wasn't my highest priority right now.

Since there was no point in speculating, I made a note to investigate after the present crisis was resolved.

Next, I tried to sort through all the information I'd just gained.

The goal: eliminate the jellyfish from the World Tree.

There were several important points to note.

Number one: Hurting the jellyfish would result in an electric shock from the World Tree. Jellyfish with eggs were especially susceptible.

Number two: If a certain number of jellyfish were eliminated, they would reproduce at a massive rate and harm the World Tree in the process.

Number three: There was a magic vacuum around the jellyfish, so spells wouldn't work in their immediate vicinity.

That about sums it up, I think.

Next, I'd just have to do some field tests.



"Miss Aaze, please approach the jellyfish at the end of that thin branch there."

"This one?"

To help come up with a plan to get rid of the jellyfish, I was on a pleasant swim around the void with Miss Aaze.

It would take some time to prepare the necessary materials and workshop spaces for the golems and the void suits, so I decided to spend that time experimenting with a relatively isolated jellyfish.

This area was somewhere in the middle of a branch that was easily six miles long but only about three feet thick.

Emerald-like crystal growths and thinner branches protruded from the brown branch.

As the name suggested, these structures were most certainly the emerald branches.

"Let's start with lesser magic."

I tried firing a Short Stun shot. The invisible bullet lost most of its power when it came close to the jellyfish, but...

"...You actually hit it."

Aaze looked surprised.

The shot nearly dissolved before reaching the jellyfish, but it managed to hit its target, albeit with reduced impact.

As long as its composition was stable enough, even magic besides pseudo-spirits could hit them.

My intermediate magic would probably be able to defeat the jellies without a problem, then.

“Next let’s try one of your pseudo-spirits, Miss Aaze.”

“Hmm. What should I use, I wonder?”

“Whatever your best is, if you please.”

I wanted to see her bust out a special move.

“My best? All right! ...■■■...”

Looking triumphant, Aaze held a special golden staff in both hands as she began her chant.

The AR display showed her MP decreasing at an alarming rate.

Light Magic circles formed around her, multiplying over and over.

Noticing her impressive display, the jellyfish stretched its tentacles in an intimidating pose.

It was probably alarmed by the amount of magic Aaze was amassing.

“...■■■ **Create Behemoth Majuu Ou Souzou!**”

A huge magic circle appeared directly in front of Aaze, and a pseudo-spirit emerged that looked like a cross between an elephant and a hippopotamus.

PAROOOOOOAR!

Despite being in the vacuum of the void, its roar echoed powerfully.

It looked extremely strong, being a destroyer-like giant over level 50 and all.

However, our friend the behemoth didn’t have any wings.

Meaning it couldn’t fly.

Its legs scrabbled in the air for a moment like a cartoon character, then a look of terror passed over its face as gravity pulled it down.

I’d been told that pseudo-spirits didn’t feel fear or pain, but I still couldn’t

help pitying it.

We shared a moment of silence for the behemoth as it disappeared, leaving only a trace of red light in its wake.

The jellyfish seemed as disappointed as we did, lowering its raised tentacles and wrapping them back around the World Tree.

“...Um, redo! That one didn’t count! This one’s for real, okay?”

Aaze carefully avoided my eyes as she started another chant, and soon she’d invoked “Create Wisp” to make a little four-inch floating ball of light.

I had her move the wisp over to the jellyfish.

Once it came within a certain distance, the jellyfish noticed it and reached out its tentacles.

When the jellyfish’s tentacle wrapped around the wisp, the wisp lost its shape and disappeared. With my “Magic Power Vision” skill, I could see the tentacle sucking up the remains of the light.

Next, Aaze made a sylph, a wind spirit, which was stronger than the wisp and able to endure the jellyfish’s tentacles.

However, the resulting visual had a bit too much of an 18+ vibe to it, so I had Aaze cancel the spell partway through that particular experiment.

It was cute how her face turned red as she panicked a little.

Next, we experimented with physical attacks.

The jellyfish seemed to be just as weak as it looked: My fairy sword was able to cut through a tentacle easily. I put the tentacle sample away in Storage for use in further experiments.

When I tossed a magic-charged bronze spear near the jellyfish, it actually caught the spear and carried it to its mouth. It’d probably be easy to poison them, then.

Finally, I tried using items.

Holy Stones, which fended off monsters, and Holy Water, which was used against the undead, had no effect at all.

The jellyfish seemed to be little more than protist creatures of the void, not monsters or demons.

Even if I had the demon-sealing bell, which was currently in Miss Karina's care, I doubted it would have any effect.

"Are you done experimenting already?"

"No, I think I'll test their stamina next."

I started lopping off the tentacles one by one, avoiding the jellyfish's attacks as I went.

To my surprise, the first tentacle I cut off earlier had already started growing back, but at least it didn't reappear as soon as it was lost or anything.

Once I'd cut off all the tentacles, I had Aaze resummon the sylph and use it to pull the umbrella part of the jellyfish away from the World Tree.

When it got a few hundred feet away, the light inside the jellyfish started blinking furiously.

Then the light turned red, outlining the jellyfish in crimson. According to Aaze, this was a characteristic of the rampage state initiating, and it would cause the World Tree to go into alert mode.

In this initial phase, only the World Tree would react, but if it went on long enough, the rampage state would spread to other nearby jellyfish.

Even as Aaze was explaining this, the branches of the World Tree began discharging electricity in all directions.

Since I was with Aaze, it didn't approach us, but the severed tentacles still attached to the World Tree were burned to a crisp, and an emerald branch nearby was snapped off by the shocks and started to fall.

This seemed like a waste, so I caught it with Magic Hand and put it away in Storage. It might make good material for a magic wand or staff.

Next, once the jellyfish umbrella was far enough away, I had Aaze's sylph let go of it.

As it started to fall, I attacked it with Fire Ball, the strongest of my lesser

magic attacks.

The Fire Ball flew without interruption from the electricity, landed a direct hit on the jellyfish, and exploded, burning up its target with far more power than its lesser counterpart Fire Shot. I guess the lack of oxygen didn't matter.

This didn't cause any rampages from the other jellyfish or additional electricity from the World Tree, perhaps because I'd defeated it in one blow.

If we were able to destroy all of them in one attack, then the World Tree would be safe.

But that was probably impossible, since so many of them were sheltered by branches of the World Tree.

"I-incredible... Was that Blast Ball? Or perhaps Flare Ball?"

I was a little proud to have impressed Aaze, but I tried to focus on what happened when my Fire Ball hit.

I watched with my "Magic Power Vision" skill the whole time, so I saw that just before the Fire Ball hit, the jellyfish sucked up only a tiny amount of magic.

Most of their magic-sucking power must come from their tentacles.

And while just slicing off the tentacles would provoke attacks from the jellyfish itself, it wouldn't cause any electrical reactions from the World Tree.

I filed these results away in my mind as I moved on with Aaze to our next test location.

"Satou, you mustn't break the eggs, remember?"

"Yes, I know."

Our destination was a jellyfish that had just laid eggs.

Jellyfish with eggs were extra-sensitive, so we were observing this one from a few hundred feet away.

About ten transparent basketball-size eggs were lined up on the branch.

The broken shells of thirty or so other eggs lay scattered around it; the parts of the World Tree branch that had been tainted with liquid from the eggs were now discolored.

Looking around, I saw several jellyfish larvae clinging to the mother's tentacles.

There weren't nearly as many larvae as there were broken eggs, so I asked Aaze why.

"Hmm, what was it again? I'll ask Jia."

Aaze cast the Space Magic spell World Phone, connecting both of us to Jia back in the observatory.

In the void, this spell covered about six miles of distance.

"...The number of eggs and larvae?"

"Yes, I thought the number of larvae seemed small compared to the amount of broken eggs."

"Many jellyfish eggs are unfertilized. You see, with the research data we got from other elf families, like the Bulainan and Beliunan clans..."

Jia explained that the liquid from the broken eggs contaminated the sap, summoning the antibodies of the World Tree, then taking in the dense magic power from those antibodies as nutrients for the few larvae to hatch.

"However, none of them has witnessed the moment when the larvae hatch. We've tried observing the jellyfish eggs, too, but the mother covers the egg with her body when it hatches..."

While we were at it, I asked more about the sap pollution.

"Does that have a negative effect on the World Tree?"

"Of course it does. Aside from the antibodies I mentioned, it can alter or clog the sap, decreasing the amount of mana that reaches the trunk."

The Beliunan clan had already helped to develop a chemical that would melt hardened sap, which was being used in areas where the clogging was most severe.

However, getting rid of the clogged sap in range of a jellyfish would cause the same rampage state as destroying an egg, so they could use it only if no jellyfish were too close by.

...*Huh?* Something about that explanation stuck out to me, but I wasn't sure what.

I tried to ruminate on everything I'd just been told.

However, my thoughts were scattered before I could collect them into words.

"Satou, where shall we go next?"

Aaze looked up at me from an unexpectedly close distance, jumbling my mind immediately.

"Hmm. Let me see..."

I wanted to continue our little date in the void, but I'd already investigated everything I needed to about the jellyfish.

I used Magic Hand to collect samples of the polluted sap and the broken eggs, then went back with Miss Aaze.

The sun was at our backs as we flew toward the World Tree.

Beneath the observatory, I noticed something glittering in a dent in the trunk.

It was a light ship, which looked just like Hayato's ship, the *Jules Verne*.

Part of its silver hull had turned black.

"It looks as if it's been burned pretty severely."

"Yes. I'm told it was protecting a golem from an electric discharge attack."

The light ships, like Aaze and the other high elves, were considered part of the World Tree, so normally it would never take an attack like that.

"It's only damaged on the surface, though, so it'll fix itself soon enough now that it's back in the World Tree."

As it turned out, these ships had automatic restoration functions.

Looking more closely, I saw that it was covered in a transparent gel of sorts.

"Are there light ships that go into those other hollows, too?"

Judging by the distance between them, there were probably about eight docks in total.

“There are only four in Bolenan, all told. Ordinarily, all World Trees come with eight light ships, but...”

As we discussed this, we passed through the dome of the observatory.

As soon as we landed, Lua and Jia came running up to greet us.

There didn't seem to be too much of a rush, so we continued our conversation, moving to a little side room in one part of the observatory.

“Did the other four deteriorate over time?”

“No, no. You see, some hundreds of thousands of years ago, a goblin demon lord was wreaking havoc. The world was nearly destroyed, so we provided our light ships at Lady Parion's request, but...”

“Many of them sank.”

“Yes. We sent out eight, but only half returned.”

Aaze looked depressed, so Jia, who was over two thousand years old herself, helped tell the story. Lua the shrine maiden was still relatively young, so she didn't know about that.

The Saga Empire hadn't existed yet at the time, so they couldn't do a hero summoning.

“In the end, all we could do was hunt the demon lord's army down to the edge of the continent. Then Lady Parion had the dragon god teach her the art of hero summoning, and the rest was up to the first hero, or so I'm told.”

“Yes, I remember it somewhat. That little hero managed to defeat the goblin with those two Holy Swords from Lady Parion and the dragon god.”

So the first hero was a dual-wielding swordsman?

He must have been pretty strong to beat a demon lord that not even a bunch of light ships could handle.

“And heroes have been truly bizarre beings ever since.”

Please don't look at me as you say that. It's making me very self-conscious.

“That hero was a sneaky one, too. Repairing and appropriating one of Bolenan's lost light ships!”

“Oh? We didn’t give that as a reward for defeating the demon lord? I think I remember saying something about passing it down through the generations...”

That must be how the *Jules Verne* came to belong to the Saga Empire, then.

Still, if the light ships had been lost thousands of years ago, why hadn’t they just rebuilt them since then?

“The other clans all used their Holytree Stone reserves to replenish their light ship fleets back to eight.”

I waited a moment, but Jia didn’t explain why the Bolenan clan alone didn’t rebuild theirs.

When pressed, she said that making a light ship required about a ton of Holytree Stone. Since the stones had a lot of other important uses, it could take up to a hundred thousand years to save up enough for a single ship.

“But Bolenan has a shortage of Holytree Stones,” Miss Aaze explained, sounding a little guilty.

Once, when the Flue Empire began to prosper, they sent royal ambassadors to the elves with game equipment. Two high elves became addicted to the game.

“There was nothing you could have done, Lady Aaze. Of the three high elves at the time, two of them were completely addicted, and instead of scolding them, most of us elves got into it along with them...”

Hooked on the gaming equipment, the elves and high elves ended up paying for it with the Holytree Stones they’d been saving up to rebuild the light ships.

It sounded to me like the Flue Empire royalty took advantage of the elves’ natural lack of business sense.

Unbidden, I remembered the elves who were frantically determined to play me in shogi.

“Eventually, all the gaming devices broke, and now none remain.”

I was curious about this gaming device the elves had gone mad for, but apparently none was left that worked.

Jia said that the games broke exactly a thousand years after they had been purchased.

It sounded like home appliances from certain shady companies. A Flue Timer, if you will?

“I understand getting depressed, but I wish they hadn’t gone to sulk in the sleep tanks...”

“Same for the elder elves... So many of them retired abruptly that there weren’t enough successors to fill their places.”

I see... Wait a second.

Didn’t someone tell me that the elves in the sleep tanks were there because they wanted to preserve special memories?

That couldn’t possibly be referring to the memories of playing some video game, right?

Yeah, I’m sure that’s not it. Let’s just change the subject.

“So what did the Flue Empire do with all those Holytree Stones?”

“They became a magic empire that dominated all the continents within three hundred years. It’s said that the bluecoins they made from the Holytree Stones made up a core part of their high-performance magic devices, as well as serving as the activation key for them. They were proof of nobility in that empire, too.”

Bluecoins, huh...? Wait, what?

I’m pretty sure I have those.

A quick search of my currency folder in Storage revealed that I had more than twenty thousand Flue Empire bluecoins. They were probably spoils from the Valley of Dragons.

When I’d first looked through all my gains from that time, I was so overwhelmed by the sheer variety and amount of coins I had, including more than ten million Flue gold coins, that I just stuffed them away and forgot about them.

I had yet to find a use for any of the currency that wasn’t for the Shiga

Kingdom, so I guess I just put them all in a Foreign Currency folder.

“...Mr. Satou, isn’t that...?!”

“Yes, a Flue Empire bluecoin.”

Nodding at Jia, I toyed with a bluecoin in the palm of my hand.

It was bigger than I’d expected, probably weighing about a hundred grams. If we used all of them, maybe we could rebuild some of those light ships?

If I could get permission to borrow one just while I was alive, I’d have no problem putting up twenty thousand bluecoins for it.

I’d still have several thousand left, so I could use those for making potions and tools and such.

At least, that was my hope, but...

“Holytree Stones that have been processed into bluecoins cannot be returned to the World Tree. Though they can be used for transmuting magic metal and making golem intelligence circuits...”

“I see. In that case, please use them for those purposes.”

I produced a bag full of a thousand bluecoins from Storage via my Garage Bag and placed it on the table.

“A-are these all bluecoins?”

“Yes, please help yourself.”

“Satou, we’re short on Holytree Stones and all, so this is wonderful, but...you really don’t need to do all that for us when you’re not even from Bolenan, you know?”

Unlike Jia, who had dollar signs in her eyes as she leaped for the bag, Miss Aaze tried to be reserved.

“Please, there’s no need to hold back. Just think of me as an honorary citizen of Bolenan, if you don’t mind.”

I took Aaze’s hands gently.

“Satou...”

Her eyes trembled as she gazed at me. If Jia and Lua weren't there, I might've kissed her before I could stop myself.

"Mr. Satou?" Perhaps sensing this, Lua raised her eyebrows at me.

My words did sound a bit like a pickup line, but that wasn't my intention this time, I swear.

The World Tree's predicament was serious; it could eventually develop into a worldwide shortage of mana.

My mind went back to the wasteland around the dwarf village that had withered due to lack of mana.

If the whole world wound up like that, I wouldn't exactly be able to go sightseeing anymore. *Tourism's no fun unless the locals are happy, after all.*

Later on, I unexpectedly learned the reason those twenty thousand bluecoins had been in my Valley of Dragons spoils.

"As I recall, many bluecoins were given to the dragon god as a tribute in the Flue Empire's twilight years. They were seeking a weapon to use against the demon lord known as the Golden Boar Lord, from what I heard."

"A weapon?"

"Yes. I don't know the details, but I know the vast desert in the middle of the continent was created as a result of the final battle between the Flue Empire and the Golden Boar Lord. Whatever happened, it was so intense that there were earthquakes all the way here in Bolenan."

As I listened to Miss Jia's explanation, I used my menu to display the map of the continent I'd acquired in the old capital.

I wasn't sure how accurate it was, but there was indeed a desert that took up nearly 20 percent of the continent, from the middle to the western part.

If it was as big as the map implied, even a sweep of hydrogen bombs couldn't have caused that.

I didn't know what sort of weapon might have done it, but I hoped fervently that it didn't exist.

Why would you make something like that, dragon god?

The thought was even scarier than the Holy Swords.

But then, I remembered the Meteor Shower spell I'd used from the magic menu.

If I filled all my Holy Swords to their limits with magic power and used them as batteries to fire Meteor Shower over and over, I might very well be able to do the same thing.

I'd better avoid using Meteor Showers in rapid succession, even by accident.

I didn't want any titles like Demon Lord or Greater Demon Lord, thank you very much!



"...So basically, I'm looking for ideas to get rid of harmful pests and animals who are damaging a very important garden."

When I returned to the ground, I gave my party a very approximate explanation of the jellyfish attacking the World Tree to see if they had any suggestions.

In the early stages of planning, it was best to brainstorm with a lot of different people.

You'd get plenty of nonsensical suggestions, of course, but sometimes you might get a clever idea that would never occur to an expert.

"Pest control, huh? If they're animals, maybe a good zap; cockroaches, you want boric acid dumplings; poisoned food for termites, of course..."

"I'm afraid we've already tried those. As far as poison, we're still doing research with the other clans."

Lua the shrine maiden was here to convey what had been tried so far.

Several other ideas came up, but all of them had already been tested by the elves.

I guess when you have a meeting of the minds where all the minds are hundreds or thousands of years old, you get a wealth of ideas and experience.

“Hmm, seems like you’ve tried just about everything...,” Arisa murmured.

“If pushing doesn’t work, you just gotta pull, sir!” Pochi said brightly.

“What does that mean, specifically?”

“That’s for you or master to think of, sir! I just put the plans into action, sir.”

So she didn’t have a specific plan.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Arisa groaned and dropped her face onto the table.

Her hair spread out on its surface, spilling over the sides.

Swish, swish.

Tama, who’d grown bored of the meeting and was rolling around on the lawn-like floor, started swatting at Arisa’s hair from under the table. Every time Arisa groaned, her hair shifted, much to Tama’s entertainment.

She really was just like a real cat sometimes, getting so amused by moving objects.

...Hmm? That’s strange.

Something about Tama’s movements caught my attention.

I waved a strand of Arisa’s hair up and down, and Tama went flying after it.

“Mr. Satou, if you can’t focus any longer, perhaps we should wrap things up for today?”

“Sorry about that. I got an idea, so I was working out the details,” I informed Lua. “How about some fake bait?”

“Like the kind used for fishing?”

I nodded and explained further.

“So instead of removing the jellyfish through sheer force, we would convince them to move away of their own accord?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

I nodded again.

“The suuun?”

“Tama’s right, sir! Master’s like the sun in the *North Wind and the Sun* story, sir!”

Tama and Pochi raised their hands excitedly.

Arisa must have told them that fable. I wasn’t sure if it was really applicable here, but they looked so pleased with themselves that I simply patted their heads and praised them for being so knowledgeable.

“Hasn’t anyone tested that yet?”

Lua looked reluctant to answer Arisa’s question.

“We knew they were drawn to magic, but when we tried to fish them out with it, it just led them to go into a rampage state and multiply...”

After that, no one had suggested anything along those lines.

A few more good ideas came up during our session, so I ended up taking notes (a habit from company meetings) and then giving them to Lua.



*

“Nanashi the Hero’s idea holds merit. The Bulainan clan approves this proposal.”

“W-we of the Beliunan clan support Nanashi’s proposal as well!”

I was participating in a gathering of high elves called a Holytree Council as an observer with Miss Aaze.

My notes from our brainstorming session had made the rounds and wound up being submitted to the council.

I didn’t want the name Satou to become famous outside of the Bolenan clan, so I had them introduce me as Nanashi the Hero.

We were in the communication room of the World Tree, watching the images of the other clans’ high elves.

Unlike my company’s videoconference system, this room actually projected 3-D images that looked just like the real thing.

Since they seemed so real, though, it made the delays in transmission that much stranger.

The Bulainan clan, the first to agree with my proposal, was evidently famous for their love of research.

The Beliunan clan was also famed for research, but unlike the knowledge-driven Bulainan clan, they seemed more concerned with earning approval.

“But we are already aware that magic provokes the Evil Jellies. Or have you forgotten the failure of we the Biloanan clan?!”

The high elf of the Biloanan clan sounded accusatory.

“Using magic as bait ended up provoking the jellyfish into a rampage and mass reproduction, did it not?”

“Of course we remember. But this proposal involves seeking bait material other than magic. If we can lure them without causing a rampage, there is no need to reject this proposal.”

The first two clans explained the goals of the plan to the objecting high elf.

“...Very well. If the research for the bait will only be conducted in one World Tree, we Biloanans will agree to the proposal.”

“Then allow us Bulainan elves to—”

“Not so fast! When it comes to chemicals, we Beliunans have far more achievements! We shall do it!”

The high elf of the Beliunan clan interrupted the one from the Bulainan clan, clearly out of a sense of rivalry.

It seemed that their clan really was the most skilled with chemicals, so the Bulainan high elf agreed to entrust the experiment site to the Beliunan family.

After a bit of quarreling, the Zuwakanan, Zantan, Baleonan, and Dayosanan clans all consented as well, and finally the red-haired Biloanan high elf declared approval.

“Hero Nanashi, we shall send Aaze the records of we the Biloanan clan’s unsuccessful experiments. Please make use of our folly to dispose of these jellyfish once and for all.”

Huh? Why does it sound like I’m the one who’s stuck making the bait? Well, whatever. They would be sending us materials and live samples of the jellyfish, too.

For the sake of the World Tree—not to mention Miss Aaze and the smiles of everyone in our future sightseeing destinations—I had no objection to doing a little jellyfish-control research.

“I shall do my best.”

“Do more than your best, if possible. Once the jellyfish have been dealt with, I shall show you my flame spirit, Ifrit, as a special favor, so be sure to succeed.”

With that, the Biloanan clan disconnected the line, and the rest of the clans said their parting words and left one by one as well.

I hadn’t noticed due to her determined personality, but aside from her hair color, the high elf of the Biloanan clan looked just like Miss Aaze.

Curious, I asked Aaze about it.

“We high elves are made from the seven prototypes of the god of creation, so there are others besides her with the same face as me, too... Why, do you prefer girls like Fuuze?”

When she looked at me like an abandoned kitten, I could barely resist the urge to embrace her.

There was no way a demi-goddess who'd lived for more than a hundred million years would fall for a guy like me, but with a look like that, I was tempted to delude myself into believing it.



“Do you need a place to do your research? You do, right? I heard from Lady Aaze that you're helping the Holytree Council. She told me, you see. So I thought perhaps you could use my father's house. A wonderful idea, wouldn't you agree?”

The day after the Holytree Council meeting, Mia's mother had a proposal of her own for me.

Her father was none other than Mr. Trazayuya, the man who made the Cradle.

“...Is this it?”

“Yes, that's right. This is the place.”

She led me by way of teleportation to a white house amid a sea of trees in the east of the Bolenan Forest.

Unlike the other workshops, it was located far from the World Tree.

She said it was for doing research, but as far as I could tell on the map, it was just an ordinary house. If I had to name any defining features, I guess it'd be all the ivy growing on the outside.

“I wonder if Gillil is here? Oh, I'm sure he is.”

Without waiting for a response, Mia's mother opened the door and entered.

“Welcome back, dear Lady Lilinatoa.”

A brownie man emerged from the back of the house.

He was only the height of a child, but he had the face and features of an old man.

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it, Gillil? It surely has. You look well, very well indeed.”

“I’m pleased to see you looking well yourself, Lady Lilinatoa.”

As he conversed with Mia’s mother, Gillil glanced at me with a keenly observant eye.

“Yes, I’m quite well. I’m doing just wonderfully. Oh, let me give these to you right away. They’re my father’s notes. Mr. Satou gave them to me, you see? He found them for us. I’m sure you’d like to read them as well, wouldn’t you, Gillil?”

Gillil, who seemed practiced in dealing with Mia’s mother’s machine gun–like rambling, looked surprised when she said “my father’s notes.”

He hesitated for a moment, then accepted the papers as if he were receiving a sacred scripture.

After holding the notes to his chest for a long, emotional moment, he seemed to suddenly remember the situation and quickly turned to me.

“You must be the human who saved Misanaria’s life.”

Maybe it was just my imagination, but the look in his eye seemed a little gentler than before.

“Oh yes. This is him all right.”

Mia’s mother resumed her onslaught.

“I’d like to let Mr. Satou use Father’s house. Is that all right? We have Lady Aaze’s permission, too. Everything’s perfect.”

“If Saint Holytree and the sage’s successor, Lady Lilinatoa, both approve, then I certainly have no objections.”

The “sage” seemed to be his way of referring to Mr. Trazayuya.

“Sir Satou, please take this key.”

“Key? It looks a bit like an amulet.”

“I shall now perform the user registration. ■■ **Transfer: Satou Jouto Satou.**”

Gillil ignored my comment and carried out his duties.

The golden key glowed blue in response to his casting, then displayed the name SATOU in Elvish letters.

That must make me its registered user.

“Now I shall explain how to reach the underground laboratory via the Travel Gate.”

Gillil guided me to the Travel Gate in question.

Mia’s mother, having said that her job here was done, had already gone home.

Unlike the fairy rings, this Travel Gate was made from a loop of emerald branches connected with a cord, giving it a little mechanical sci-fi feel.

“When you enter the loop, it will trigger a switch in the floor, teleporting you automatically. Once I have disappeared, please step inside the ring.”

I nodded, and Gillil stepped into the ring, vanishing with a little green special effect.

Aside from the switch, which was like an automatic doormat, it seemed to be just like a normal fairy ring.

When I teleported, I was greeted by the night sky—no, just a very tall ceiling. I saw some moss and minerals glowing up there on the rocks’ surface.

According to my map, this was an underground cave nearly half a mile beneath the house. It was very large, too.

“Allow me to turn on the lights.”

Gillil pressed a button on the wall, and streetlights lit up, rendering the panorama of lights on the ceiling invisible.

The light revealed several building-like structures. Those must be Trazayuya’s laboratory, experiment sites, and so on.

I entered.

“This is the main laboratory.”

The floors and walls inside were made from a linoleum-like resin, bearing a resemblance to the research lab I’d seen in the Cradle.

The lab included a reference room, a library, and even bigger transmutation equipment than the stuff at the magic-tool workshop.

The hangar in the back of the transmutation room contained something even more interesting.

...What is that?

There were several glass tubes standing along the wall, big enough for a human to enter.

“Those are cultivation tanks for creating and repairing homunculi. The sage mainly used them to produce body parts.”

I searched via Storage through the other documents I’d found in Trazayuya’s Cradle.

According to the manual I found, I could use this equipment to enhance Nana’s Foundation techniques.

It was like the kind of power-up area you’d find in certain games.



Research day one: I’ve been poring over manuals all day, trying to get the equipment to work.

Setting it all up and learning how to use it ate up more time than I’d expected, so now I’m just hoping to finish before dawn.

Mr. Trazayuya, the head of this laboratory, seems to have kept a development log as he worked, so I’ve decided to do the same.

Research day two: Miss Jia visited to bring the materials and specimens provided by the other clans.

I put them away in Storage and used “Parallel Thoughts” to read several documents at a time. My menu’s character string search function came in handy for the first time in a while. If I’d had these abilities when I was a game

developer, I bet I would never have had to do any death marches.

By the way, these materials were all sent by way of Travel Gates among the World Trees. Apparently, they're rarely used because of the high cost of transmission.

Research day three: Finished reading all the materials. The elves are even more brilliant than I imagined.

They've just about finished researching repellent substances already. Since these can all be omitted from the search for attractive substances, things should proceed pretty quickly.

For now, I'll experiment on the jellyfish tentacle samples I collected in the void.

Research day five: tough going. Is magic the only thing the jellyfish are attracted to?

Research day six: I've been taking advantage of my body's relative lack of needs, but Mr. Gillil told me to take a nap.

Come to think of it, I do feel like my brainpower has been a little low. I guess working for more than five days without sleep isn't very efficient.

I'll eat the cream puffs Lulu brought me when I wake up. I bet they'll go great with some nice black coffee.

Research day seven: Don't underestimate the power of sleep.

With a clear head, I stopped blindly experimenting and went back to searching through my materials.

In Trazayuya's library and reference room, I found some notes analyzing jellyfish from the past tens of thousands of years.

I'll make copies of these notes and have them sent to the Beliunans and the other clans.

Research day eight: Finally made a little progress.

When I gave Gillil a taste of dragonspring liquor, the jellyfish tentacles reacted.

At first, I thought it was just because that sake was made from the black

dragon's magic and probably contained a lot of mana, but they reacted faintly to other distilled liquor, too.

After experimenting with a few more options, I'll have Gillil pass this information along.

Research day ten: I've finished testing all the liquor I had on hand, so now I'm trying various sauces and seasonings.

Maybe I should blame it on the smell of soy sauce, but the tentacles started looking a little appetizing. I found myself wanting to eat one but decided against it, since they might be poisonous.

In the evening, I received information from the research-loving Beliunans and Bulainans about their experiments with various liquors. Having a lot of researchers makes this sort of thing go much faster.

Research day ten, night: I gave in to my curiosity and made tentacle teriyaki.

Earlier in the afternoon, I had a lab mouse eat one of the tentacles, and it didn't seem to be affected.

So I tried a little bit, and it was tastier than I expected. Not a delicacy, exactly, but the kind of taste you could get addicted to. It'd definitely go well with dragonspring liquor.

Research day eleven: The lab mouse coughed up blood and died.

Nothing's happened to me, but I'd better not feed this to anyone else.

Just to be safe, I used Clairvoyance to take a look inside my stomach, but I didn't see any inflammation or anything.

In the evening, I received word from the Beliunan clan that they'd begun developing an alcohol-based bait potion.

None of the other seasonings I tried did anything, not even mirin, so I'll switch over to doing that, too, starting tomorrow.

Research day twelve: My stomach feels strange. I really shouldn't have eaten that tentacle.

Some fibrous white thing is growing in my appendix.



I closed my research journal and put it away in Storage.

I had better erase that last part. The fibrous white substance turned out to be the same crystallization that had occurred in the polluted sap in the World Tree, so the potion developed by the Beliunan clan got rid of it easily.

“It’s unusual to see you outside the laboratory, Master Satou.”

As I was stretching in the break room, Mr. Gillil appeared, carrying a pleasant-smelling package.

He’d started out calling me “Sir Satou” when I first came here, but now he’d switched to “Master” for some reason.

“Your friend Miss Lulu came earlier and left this for you.”

I had checked in on the girls with the Space Magic spell Clairvoyance often and spoken with them via Telephone once a day, but I had used Return to actually go back and visit them only a handful of times.

“Perfect, I was just getting hungry. Gillil, could you please make some tea? Let’s eat together.”

“Certainly, sir.”

There was a letter in the package, so I looked it over while Gillil made the tea.

...Aha! This is great!

For the first time in a while, I felt my mood brighten.

“You must have received some good news, eh, sir?”

“I certainly have. They’ve finally found turmeric and cumin!”

The letter said that the leprechaun expedition party had located turmeric, while the spriggans had located cumin.

They’d already found spices like coriander and cardamom, but these two had been the final hurdle.

“Now we can make some real curry.”

I knew this wasn't the time for such a trivial matter, but my heart soared at the idea of finally tasting curry again after so long.

"Curry is a legendary dish from the hero's home kingdom, correct?"

"That's right. I got a letter that they've found all the ingredients we need."

I was sure Lulu, Nea, and the others could make a perfectly good curry, but I still wanted to help them.

"I'm going to take a few days off."

I had been running on hardly any sleep for almost two weeks now.

"Excellent, sir. With the other elves on the matter as well, there is no need for you to work so hard on your own," Gillil said.

"Thanks, Gillil. I'll be back. Sorry, but would you mind delivering this sample bait potion and the recipe to the others?"

"Y-you've already completed it?!"

I handed the results of my research to the surprised Mr. Gillil.

It was the first prototype. I'd made it the previous day, determined not to give up.

I'd let the Beliunan clan perfect and mass-produce the bait potion. They liked research anyway, so surely they'd be up to the task.



"I'm home. Smells great in here."

When I returned to the tree house, I was greeted by a spicy fragrance.

"Masterrr?"

"Welcome back! Sir!"

"Satou."

Tama, Pochi, and Mia tackled me at once, rubbing their cheeks and noses against me.

I guess I was gone a little too long.

“Master, is the upgrade pack ready for installation yet? I inquire.”

“Sorry, sorry. I’ve been so busy with research that I haven’t finished fixing up the cultivation tank yet.”

As soon as I responded, Nana slumped down glumly. There was little change in her expression, but her disappointment would be obvious to anyone.

Last time I’d come back, I told her that we might be able to upgrade her Foundation functions, so she must have been waiting excitedly this whole time.

“Can you wait a little longer? I promise I’ll take care of it before we leave Bolenan Forest.”

“...Master’s instructions registered, I report.”

Nana still looked depressed, so I made a proposal to cheer her up.

“In the meantime, could you consult with the rest of the group on what kind of functions you’d like to add and make a list for me?”

“Th-that is a wonderful proposal, master, I commend!”

While the younger kids were still clinging to my waist, Nana embraced me over them, her expression relatively cheerful now.

“Guilty,” Mia grumbled as she was squeezed between Nana and me, but her complaint didn’t affect the excited homunculus.

“Master, welcome back.”

“It’s good to see you home, master.”

When I went to the kitchen, I found Liza and Arisa watching the chefs from the doorway.

As far as I could tell, their job was to keep the winged fairies from invading.

“Let me gooo!”

“It smells so good in there!”

“Graaah!”

Whenever the fairies got too close to the source of the smell, they lost their cool and started attacking.

I told the pair to keep up the good work and then went to see how Lulu and the other cooks were faring.

“Smells good.”

“Welcome back! Master, sniffing the turmeric too much will hurt your nose, so please be careful.”

“I will, thanks.”

I nodded at Lulu’s grave warning.

Her slightly reddened nose only made her cuter.

Still, was turmeric’s smell always that strong?

Since this was a parallel world and all, it might just be a different spice with similar properties.

“Mr. Satou, we’ve gathered all the spices from the recipe. We’re following the preparatory steps now.”

Nea was crushing spices in a hand mill as she gave me a progress report.

The spriggan and leprechaun expedition teams who’d found the spices were washing away their exhaustion in the elves’ public bath.

I wanted to give them a little thank-you, too.

“Liza, would you mind running an errand for me?”

“Of course, master.”

I had Liza bring some light-blue carbonated ice-cream snacks to the fridge in the public bathhouse.

Liquor might have been good, too, but I figured I’d go with something that tasted extra-good after a bath.

“...Shoot.”

Looking through my food stocks, I let slip a groan.

“What’s the matter, master?”

“We don’t have *fukujinzuke*. And the only leeks we have are pickled in regular oil.”

Fukujinzuke is a side dish made from daikon radishes pickled in soy sauce, and it's an indispensable topping for curry back in Japan.

And if you're going to have leeks with curry, they've got to be pickled in sweet vinegar.

I'd given all my radishes to the orcs living beneath the old capital, so I didn't have any left to pickle to make *fukujinzuke*, either.

"Wow, and you looked so serious. That's not what I expected..."

Arisa rolled her eyes.

As if she wasn't complaining that the pickled ginger wasn't red when I made beef bowls...

Once we'd finished fine-tuning the five-spice mix for the curry, I left Bolenan Forest to acquire the final missing pieces.

I must get my hands on fukujinzuke!



"Leeks? We just pickled the lot of them, so they won't be ready to eat for a while... Erm, are you all right, sir?"

I'm too late...

This was the only place in the Ougoch Duchy with untreated leeks, but I'd arrived just a few moments too late.

But if they'd only just started pickling them, I could probably wash them off, so I determinedly bought up all the pickling leeks anyway.

None of the proper shops in the old capital had any pickles like the kind I wanted, so I went to an area with a bunch of stalls selling pickled foods.

"*Fukujinzuke*? Never heard of it."

Since the name alone wasn't getting me anywhere, I tried describing it, but...

"Pickled radishes? We would never carry such a nasty product." The stall owner shook her head brusquely.

I'd forgotten that people in the old capital didn't like radishes.

“Graaannny, give me something to eat, pleeease...”

“You haven’t eaten again, child? You mustn’t send all your money home to your folks if it means you starve yourself.”

As I slumped down in despair, I heard a voluptuous lady of the night asking the old woman at the stall next door for food. The contrast between her sultry appearance and childish whining could only be described as “gap moe.”

“Oh, I know. A merchant from Kuhanou County brought by some rare pickled delicacies earlier. Since that’s your hometown and all, I suppose I could let you have a few.”

“Yaaay, Kuhanou pickles! I love you, Granny!”

The woman dug in to the snacks, which were brown pickled cucumbers and eggplants.

“Would you like to try some, too, young man?”

“If you don’t mind...”

The old woman caught me staring and offered me some Kuhanou pickles. The combination seemed to consist of cucumbers, eggplants, melons, and such pickled in soy sauce and mirin.

Pretty good... And actually, very close to the taste of *fukujinzuke*.

The sourness was a little strong, but other than that, it was just about right.

“Ma’am, are there any radishes pickled in a similar way to this?”

“Radishes? As I believe my neighbor mentioned, you won’t find such a foul thing anywhere in the old capital.”

The old woman cut down my hopes mercilessly, but the woman happily eating the Kuhanou pickles gave me a ray of hope.

“The ones in Kuhanou County do include radishes.”

“Really?” I asked excitedly, and she nodded.

“Kuhanou pickling is used to preserve all kinds of scrap vegetables. I bet you’d find places in Sedum City or Kuhanou City selling just Kuhanou pickled radishes.”

That was all I needed to know.

Now I just had to use a map search—perfect, there were a few shops in those cities that specialized in pickled goods.

“Thank you very much. Here’s something for your troubles.”

“Ahhh! Are you sure?!”

I pressed some gold coins into the woman’s hand to express my gratitude, then bought a bunch of different kinds of pickles from the stall that had given me the clue to find *fukujinzuke*.

Just as I was about to leave for Kuhanou County, I heard a few familiar voices nearby.

“When’s Nana coming back, miss?”

“What about Nana’s mashter, miss?”

“They’re both far away on a journey, so they won’t be back for another year or so.”

It was the shrine maiden Sara of the Tenion Temple and the seafolk kids Nana had cared for.

The kids were helping her give out food to the needy.

I would have loved to go say hello, but it would be strange for me to show up in the old capital right now, so I had to satisfy myself with the sight of their happy faces.

Seeing Sara’s expression reminded me to drop a bag of gold coins into the offering box at Tenion Temple.

While I was at it, I sent out a few letters, including one to Sara and one to Zena in Seiryuu City.

Should I send one to Karina, too? She wasn’t back to the Muno Barony yet, but it shouldn’t be a problem if the letter got there before she did.

I didn’t send one to Princess Menea in the royal capital, though. That could wait until we got to Labyrinth City.

Now, Kuhanou County was a little far away.

It was even farther north than the Muno Barony, the territory north of the Ougoch Duchy. Kuhanou was the home of Sedum City, where I helped the witch's apprentice thwart a few small-time officials' conspiracy.

It was easy enough to get to the old capital within about ten minutes by repeatedly using the Return spell, but I didn't have any Return seal slates any farther than here.

I would have to get there by using "Skyrunning" and place some Return seal slates while I went.

While I was at it, I might as well check in on some of the people I'd met on my journey.

I removed my disguise in an alley and switched into Hero Nanashi mode by donning my black clothes and silver mask, then I used Return to get to the pit I'd made near the old capital.

The pit was located in a forest far from even the hunting trails, so no one would see me teleporting.

Most of my Return seal slates had been set up in a similar manner.

They were waterproofed, too, of course.

Once I confirmed on my map that no one was around, I jumped up with "Skyrunning," then sprinted through the sky just above the trees, heading north along the great river.

I crossed the treacherous Grapevine Mountains, home of the orcs' Dreamglow Cavern, then passed by Gururian City and the dwarf city of Bolehart, leaving seal slates a safe distance away for later use as I went.

Before long, I'd left Ougoch Duchy and entered the Muno Barony.

"Good, things seem to be going along well."

Muno City's reconstruction was coming along smoothly, and the former slums had been rebuilt with tenements and gabo-fruit fields.

Other crops had also been planted outside the city; fresh vegetables were already starting to pop up from the ground.

I left Muno City behind and gazed at the former ghost fort, which had been renamed Fort Pendragon. From what I could tell from far away, the kids were happy and healthy, raising goats and orange chickens.

Since this was technically my villa and the kids were in my employ, I checked in with Clairvoyance from time to time to make sure they were doing all right.

As I flew through the sky toward Kuhanou County, I heard some bustling down below.

It looked like a gang of thieves was fighting against the Muno Barony soldiers. Fighting bravely on the front lines were Zotol, the reformed thief, and Hauto, the former false hero and current knight.

They seemed to be winning the fight, so I just cheered them on silently and kept moving.

Aside from such minor incidents, I reached Kuhanou County without a problem and arrived at Sedum City with time to spare before sunset.

At a glance, the owner and catfolk kids at the pottery studio who had helped us out before seemed to be doing well.

Now, time to head to the pickle shop.

A lot of the stalls seemed to be closed, but the shop I had in mind was still open.

“I’d like some Kuhanou pickled radishes. Do you have any in stock?”

“Yes, we do! How many shall I wrap up for you?”

The girl at the counter opened the lid of a pickle jar with great vigor.

It was brown, like the Kuhanou pickles I saw in the old capital, but there was no mistake: These were the *fukujinzuke* I’d been looking for.

I requested a taste test just to be sure, then bought the store’s entire stock of them.

“Whoa! Never sold out like this before. Are you sure you don’t mind buying these other ones, too? They’re not all radishes.”

“Of course. They were all delicious.”

That wasn't just lip service. It was the truth.

The *fukujinzuke* from that shop was perhaps the best I had ever tasted. My favorite was the kind that had seven different varieties of vegetables in all.

With my goal accomplished, I went around buying up a bunch of other kinds of radishes as well, then used Return in rapid succession to get back to the Bolenan Forest before the sun finished setting.

Magic really was the best.



The evening ended after we put the finishing touches on the curry powder and tasted the *fukujinzuke*, so we started preparing for the curry feast early the next morning.

I'd already asked Nea to get us permission to use the plaza in front of the tree houses.

If we did it in the kitchen of our own tree house, the whole place would smell like curry, even the bedrooms.

In addition to my party, the cooking elves, and some helpful brownies, Miss Aaze showed up early in the morning.

She'd been working way too hard, so she had the entire day off.

She told me that all the elves who'd been working in the void were taking days off in turns until the mass-production of the bait potions began.

Since that meant this curry feast was also a send-off meal before an epic battle, I wanted to make it a success for Aaze's sake, too.

"Nana, help the brownies peel the vegetables, please."

"Yes, master."

We were using a strength-in-numbers technique to deal with the huge amount of sweet potatoes, carrots, and so on.

"Liza, can you carve up these birds?"

"Right away, sir."

I handed Liza some mountain birds from the Garage Bag.

It wasn't chicken, exactly, but I thought it'd make good tandoori chicken anyway. According to the recipe that was listed in that memo along with the curry recipes, tandoori chicken had to be cooked after marinating in sauce for about half a day.

If we started now, they'd be ready to eat right around noon, or even sooner if we used Water Magic to accelerate the process.

I wanted to make some chicken cutlets to top the curry, too, but we didn't seem to have enough poultry for that.

"Mia, we could use more poultry. Is there someone we could ask?"

"Mm. Hiya."

She probably meant that we could ask Hishirotoya, the hunter.

Mia pounded her little chest to indicate that she would take care of it, and she went off with Tama and Pochi following close behind her.

"Mr. Satou, the cooking implements are ready," Nea called. Behind her was Miss Noa, who'd been hard at work to help reproduce the curry.

In addition to the stove-type magic tools, there were ten cauldrons around the size of large drums.

They were actually magic devices that could heat up and cook entirely by themselves. Very elf-like.

I stood ready to cook in front of the stove, wielding a frying pan.

First, I would cook the chopped onions.

According to the notes, slowly caramelized onions were a major key to giving the curry its sweetness and depth of flavor. I'd also cut some onions into star and moon shapes along with the carrots to add later.

For now, I cooked the onions slowly.

Slowly.

Slooowly.

Veeery slooowly.

When they reached a certain point, Noa kept peering over at me from her hiding place behind Nea. Once they turned golden brown, the onions were done.

A book I once read said something along the lines of “cook onions until they bring tears to your eyes.”

“Now, once they’ve been caramelized like this, transfer them to the pot.”

With that, I switched places with Lulu.

Nea and her friends lined up alongside Lulu to start frying onions as well.

Meanwhile, I made the sauce for the tandoori chicken. Once Liza was finished cutting up the poultry, I put it in to marinate.

I could use the hearts and gizzards to make snacks for the beastfolk girls later.

Maybe I could make something with the cartilage to go with the elves’ drinks...

...Hmm?

Suddenly, I sensed two pairs of eyes watching me from the shadows. Arisa and Aaze.

That’s not good.

Letting Arisa cook was a surefire recipe for failure, and I couldn’t help imagining Aaze knocking over a cauldron and spilling curry everywhere.

After a moment’s thought, I beckoned the two over.

Arisa and Aaze pointed at themselves with innocent *Who, me?* faces.

When I nodded, they burst into sunny smiles and came trotting over to me.

Knowing what I had to do next pained my very soul.

“Hee-hee, hello!”

“D-did you need something?”

I nodded gravely and handed them a basket full of souvenirs from the old capital. As they stared into it blankly, I stuck a lollipop into each of their mouths.

Arisa, realizing my intentions, glowered at me even as she chomped down on the candy.

Aaze didn't seem so sure, and she accepted the candy with slightly red cheeks, giving the whole thing a bit of an erotic undertone.

"Hand out this candy to the fairies so they don't get in the way, please."

When I said this to Arisa, Aaze finally caught on to my plan.

Oh, please don't give me that look of betrayal.

Arisa took the basket in one hand, reaching with her other for the hand of the teary-eyed Miss Aaze to gently lead her around the plaza, gathering the fairies at the entrance.

Sorry, Arisa. Please take care of the fairies and Aaze for me.

Although it was hot inside the elves' magic cauldrons, the outside was only warm to the touch.

Once the water had started boiling, I lowered the temperature so we could start skimming the scum off the top.

"Master, I volunteer to take charge of the skimming, I declare."

Nana's eyes sparkled, so I handed her the ladle to take over the rather annoying job.

It was too much work for her alone, so I asked Liza to help as well.

The two of them scooped steadily and methodically. I couldn't think of anyone but the serious Liza and curious Nana who could do such a boring job so intently. I would have to find a way to thank them later.

"Allow me to help as well."

The samurai elf Shiya jumped in to lend a hand, perhaps swayed by Liza's serious expression.

The atmosphere was getting pretty intense, considering they were just skimming scum off the top of the broth.

I didn't want to ruin the mood by commenting on it, so I decided to leave them to it.

Once the scum was removed and the vegetables cooked, all that was left was adding the curry powder.

Nea and the others were in charge of watching the vegetables, so I decided to prepare some garnishes while I had the chance.

Lulu helped me prepare a variety of fried foods as toppings.

I decided to go with various meat cutlets, shrimp, and whitefish. Partway through, I put Lulu in command of the operation, as some brownies and elves had come to help, lured over by the smell.

Now, for Mia and the other vegetarians, I wanted to make fried squash and pumpkin in addition to the salads and vegetable sticks.

So far, we'd just been doing ingredient prep; now it was time to do some actual frying.

I sliced the extra potatoes thin and fried them into potato chips, put them in a basket, and carried them to Arisa, who was playing dice with the fairies. I brought along carbonated drinks with ice, too.

"Some snacks for you, Arisa."

"Hooray! Potato chips!"

"Make sure you share them with everyone."

"Okey-dokey! Popo, Lily, line up the fairies! I'm going to hand out some snacks from the land of the hero!"

"Aye-aye, sir!"

"Arisa, you're so dramatic."

"Smells great, though!"

The potato chips wound up being quite popular with the fairies.

"Thank you, Satou."

Aaze smiled at me meekly when the fairies who'd been playing with her hair left to get their share of snacks.

I was glad to have been able to help her.

With a smile and a wave, I returned to my cooking.

“Hey! No going for the baaasket!”

From behind me, I heard Arisa shouting with relatively serious rage. *Hang in there, Arisa.*

Ignoring the ruckus, I started preparing some sweet drinks for those who weren't so good with spicy food.

In addition to the coffee milk, fruit milk, and other beverages I'd made for the public bathhouse, I also used a matcha-like powder that Nea had acquired for me to make matcha lattes.

Once they were finished, I put them in a magic freezer device to cool. If I could come up with a magic device for stirring, maybe I could make ice cream soon, too.

When the vegetables were just about cooked, we added the curry powder a little at a time; once the powder dissolved, I stirred it for a while, but it wasn't really thickening up. Was the recipe in the memo pad wrong?

In the end, I added a bit of wheat flour to thicken it easily. Now it didn't seem flavorful enough, so I threw in some butter for good measure.

Now I just had to reduce the heat and wait for the vegetables to soak up some flavor. Meanwhile, I could go fry the toppings.

“Preeey?”

“It's a huge catch, sir!”

“Look.”

Tama, Pochi, and Mia came running up, stopping just outside the plaza, as they were covered in dirt.

Behind them was my teacher Hishirotoya, as well as some of the other elf teachers who were skilled in hunting.

Goya was there, too, acting smug. From the looks of it, he'd brought down a mountain bird.

“Good work.”

One of the elf teachers who hadn't gone with them used Practical Magic to clean up the hunting group.

Pochi and Mia smelled a bit strange, so I used some deodorizing magic on them. Maybe they'd gotten caught by some kind of plant monster? Must have been a pretty tough hunt.

We butchered the poultry, but there wasn't enough time to marinate it with the tandoori chicken, so I figured we could use it for toppings instead. Some of it resembled pheasant or duck, which promised to be tasty.

I'd have loved to add some dashi to the duck and make duck hot pot or udon, but for now I just steamed it to top a salad.

I had the elves who'd just come back from hunting sit down at the temporary tables set out for the feast, and I gave them drinks and snacks to get a head start on the party.

Tama and Pochi got the elves to share some chicken skewers with them. *Don't eat too much, you two.*

"Mm?"

Mia came up to me and held out the basket of potato chips I'd given Arisa.

It was empty, of course. Maybe she was hungry and wanted some chips of her own?

"It's almost time for dinner, so I'm not making any more right now. I'll make some for snacks tomorrow, okay?"

"Promise."

Mia stuck out her little finger, so I wrapped mine around it to seal the promise.

Aaze, who was once again surrounded by winged fairies, stared at us in shock; maybe she was unfamiliar with pinkie promises. At any rate, I decided to go ahead and ignore it.

The scent of curry was drawing more and more elves to the plaza, so we wound up starting the feast a little earlier than planned.

There was no need for any dramatic opening remarks.

We simply worked together to start doling out curry rice and bringing it to the tables. With the amount of people present, it felt like we were feeding a camp or something.

For the rice, we used ordinary long-grain rice, the standard in the Ougoch Duchy.

In the process of our spice search, I'd also found some short-grain rice, but a curry shop I used to eat at used long-grain rice, so I just stuck with the usual.

I prepared some naan, both plain and with raisins, but since it was Japanese-style curry, I figured pairing it with rice was the orthodox way to go.

"Wow, look at all these different kinds!" Arisa marveled.

In fact, I'd made four different varieties of curry: green, red, yellow, and brown.

First, the green curry, which used a leafy green that resembled spinach.

I figured this one would go over well with the vegetable-loving crowd, like Mia. It was about average spiciness.

Next, the red curry, which contained plenty of red pepper.

This one was for the spicy-food connoisseurs. Nea and Lulu got teary-eyed when they taste tested it, so it seemed to be pretty spicy. I added plenty of cubed rocket wolf meat to the red curry.

In the yellow curry, I'd boldly thrown in the tandoori chicken.

It wasn't quite as spicy as the red curry but was still pretty up there. Its color was a bright, almost neon yellow, perhaps because of the parallel world spices.

Finally, the brown curry.

This was a standard Japanese curry made with beef. I prepared two separate spice levels for this: one average and one sweet.

At first I worried they wouldn't like the brown curry, but when I consulted Nea, she responded, "But beef stew is brown, too, isn't it?" So I guess I didn't need to worry.

The brown beef curry proved popular with the girls. I'd also put out plenty of fried toppings for people to add as they liked.

For side dishes, aside from the obvious *fukujinzuke* and sweet pickled leeks, we prepared a fresh vegetable salad, boiled cabbage, mashed potatoes, chopped vegetables, and so on.

Once everyone had food in front of them, the feast began.

Ahhh, curry. Reunited at last.

"Mm, spicyyy?"

"It's spicy but yummy, sir."

I'd tried to make the sweet one as mild as possible for the kids, but I guess it was still a little spicy for Tama and Pochi.

"Spicy yet delicious."

Liza, I know the toppings were self-serve, but...you didn't need to pile up so much fried whale that the curry got completely lost underneath it.

Incidentally, she'd chosen the chicken curry. The poultry must have been the deciding factor.

"This curry is cuter, I declare."

Nana seemed pleased with her spicy red curry, topped with a soft-boiled egg and apple slices cut into rabbit shapes.

"Ngh, it's good, but it's so spicy I can hardly eat it..."

"Hang in there, Aaze." Mia encouraged Aaze.

I'd been watching affectionately as Aaze ate with tears in her eyes, gulping down a glass of water after each bite, but I should probably help her out.

Mia was eating green curry herself.

"Miss Aaze, try this instead." I took her plate of ordinary curry and replaced it with the sweet brown curry.

"Ah, this one isn't spicy! I can eat it just fine."

"Glad to hear it."

The staff was happy to eat her first plate of curry. There were others who seemed to be struggling with the spiciness, too, so I sent around brownies to tell them about the sweet curry.

“If your mouth still stings, try this drink, too. It should help with the spiciness a little.”

“Th-thank you... Oh, it’s delicious! So nice and sweet.”

Aaze was still making a face, so I offered her a matcha latte.

The way she held it with both hands and gulped it down was adorable.

I didn’t think I was staring, but for some reason, I heard Arisa and Mia call “Guilty!” from across the room.

Come to think of it, I did forget to give out drinks to the girls. I planned to do so, of course, but I guess they didn’t like that I brought one to Aaze first.

It wouldn’t be fair to keep it all to my little group, so once I’d shared with them, I brought the rest of the matcha latte bottles to the elves’ tables.

“Ahhh, this is paradise. It’s just as good as that old curry chain.”

“Arisa, look! Hamburg curry, sir!”

“So deliish?”

Nea had apparently cooked up hamburg steaks with the leftover meat. That girl sure loved her hamburg steaks.

Munching away on some *fukujinzuke*, I gazed around at the rest of the curry feast.

Noa, the elf whose dream had been to re-create curry, was so overcome with emotion that she was weeping as she ate a plate of each kind.

“Goya, you need some of that sweet curry or what?”

“Mrrr. No.”

A drunken elf teased Goya, who was teary-eyed as he ate his spicy curry.

He looked ecstatic when Mia offered him a matcha latte.

Being childhood friends and all, they seemed to get along pretty well. As far

as I could tell, they were more like a doting older brother and a rebellious little sister than a young couple.

Shifting my gaze, I located the spriggans and leprechauns from the search party who'd hunted down the spices for us. For some reason, they seemed a little nervous about being surrounded by elves.

I decided to put together some takeout curry for them later. If not for their hard work, we wouldn't be eating this curry in the first place, after all.

Before the sun set, the thousand-odd servings of curry had disappeared, along with all the toppings.

Some spinoff dishes had been developed, too, like Liza's patented "whale cutlets with curry."

Despite all the food they'd eaten, everyone still went for the fruit jelly I'd made for dessert. I know there's always room for dessert, but that had to be bad for their health. I decided to make some stomach medicine to hand out later.

Thus, the initial curry feast came to an end, but there were complaints from the elves who hadn't been able to join in, so the festival of curry seemed set to continue for a while.

I didn't want to eat curry every day, so I left things to Nea and her chef friends, who were raring to go.

Hopefully the elf village wouldn't turn yellow in the process.



"...You were attacked by a jellyfish?!"

"I-it wasn't me who got attacked."

I got a little worked up about Aaze's unexpected news.

The day after the curry feast, I was making magic staves out of Hei Long's claw and the treant's branches when Aaze and Lua came to visit.

"Mr. Satou, you're a bit too close."

"E-excuse me."

Lua's smile twitched as she separated me from Aaze.

I'd panicked a little at the thought of Aaze being attacked, that's all.

"Two spirit users were attacked this morning as soon as they went out into the void."

According to Lua, although there were other spirit users and some pseudo-spirits in the same place, these two spirit users were the only ones who were directly attacked by jellyfish.

Until now, the jellyfish had always ignored people unless they were attacked first or if magic was used near them.

"Were they drunk, by any chance?"

"No, those planning to go into the void are forbidden from drinking a drop of alcohol for the span of a day before their trip."

"Those two are very serious, so I can't imagine they would violate the rules."

Lua and Aaze shot down my alcohol theory.

"Besides, they ate so much curry the day before that they could barely move..."

So the two who were attacked had also taken part in the curry feast.

...There's no way, right?

I asked a few more questions and began to form a new hypothesis.

"I'd like to test something out, if you don't mind."

When we arrived at the observatory, I used the Practical Magic spell Deodorant on myself.

After I set up a seal slate for the Return spell in a corner of the observatory, just to be safe, I put on a void suit and went out to see the jellyfish alone.

"This is Satou. No reaction from the jellyfish yet."

After reporting in, I produced a tiny amount of curry powder in the palm of my void suit.

Aha!

The jellyfish shot out their tentacles very quickly indeed.

I didn't know how they even detected the smell, since there was no air in the void.

Regardless, this was a far more intense reaction than the alcohol-based bait potion the Beliunan clan made.

I could take these jellyfish on now, but I didn't want to send them into berserk mode, so I used Return to reach the observatory.

"I'm back."

I explained the results of my experiment to Aaze and Lua, and we arranged to inform the other clans of the discovery of a new bait.

While we waited for confirmation, Kiya from the magic-tool shop and Aea from the transmutation workshop helped me make a magic device to produce curry-scented mist. I offered samples and blueprints to each of the other clans.

Since the void still had gravity, and not even balloons could float there, I tested out a prototype device called a "void engine" that I'd found in Trazayuya's research.

When I saw it ascending through the void without any visible propulsion, I thought maybe it was a gravity-controlling device, but alas, when I looked over the materials in more detail, I figured out that it was a similar mechanism to my "Skyskimming" skill.

The device created a small floating foothold inside itself with Practical Magic, then ran a gear along it to climb upward.

While we were developing this device further, the golem maniac Kiya and I got a little carried away and wound up making a living doll using a World Tree branch for use in the void.

"Satou, it worked! The World Tree's lightning isn't attacking the doll!"

"Perfect. Now we can put the living dolls in charge of working in the void instead of sending people out into danger."

With a little experimenting, Aaze and I got even better results than I'd expected.

From what I heard, there was another elf who had thought of a similar thing once. This time, though, we used a Treespirit Pearl from a treant to transform a sprout on the World Tree and use it as a base for the doll.

The engine that made the doll move was a separately prepared magic device, but we had to get a little clever to make that work, too.

“Seems awfully heavy... Don’t you think the lead layer is a little too thick?”

“If we make it any thinner, the jellyfish will react to the doll.”

In order to keep the jellyfish from noticing the magic power, we sectioned off the engine with lead, which didn’t conduct magic.

I explained these mechanisms to the other elf clans, too. Few of them had Treespirit Pearls, but they all had some Forest Magic experts, so that wasn’t a problem.

I really wanted to hurry up and learn how to chant already.

After a few days of this, the Beliunan clan’s experiments confirmed that the scent of curry attracted jellyfish and didn’t cause them to go into a rampage state.

Then I was invited to the Holytree Council again...

“Very well. In accordance with the vote, we have decided to proceed with Nanashi the Hero’s proposed strategy, Operation Curry.”

There were some protests to the name of the operation, but in the end they decided to adopt it as is.

Names should be easy to understand, in my opinion.

“As the Bolenan clan has contributed the most to the development of this strategy, I propose that they spearhead the operation.”

Aaze made a little fist pump of triumph. Spearheading must be considered an honor.

It was cute to see her celebrate like that.

“B-but we the Beliunan clan also—”

“But of course. I would like the Beliunan clan to be second to enact the plan.”

“Hmm. V-very well, then.”

The high elf of the Zuwakanan clan, who was acting as the chairman, expertly dealt with the protests of the Beliunan clan, who had also contributed to the research. I guess the chairman had the authority to assign such roles.

Evidently, they had the clans undertake the operation in succession instead of all at the same time in case of any unexpected situations.

“The operation shall commence ten days from now, when all clans have completed the repellent potion application as a preliminary step.”

This repellent potion was to be applied to the branches of the World Tree to keep the jellyfish in check and ensure they would follow the curry powder spray.

“Any clans who may be falling behind are to report in at once. The Holytree Council wishes you all the very best of luck.”

With this slightly military-sounding send-off from the chairman, the council meeting came to an end.

All that was left now was to prepare for the extermination process and make some backup plans.

Pest Control

Satou here. When things are going well, I automatically get anxious. Maybe it's a programmer's self-defense instinct? The fact is, unexpected problems are going to come up whether you're ready or not.

"Now, children of Bolenan! Let us commence Operation Curry! Let's be careful and cautious, and enjoy ourselves a little, too!"

Aaze's cute voice echoed through the observatory.

First, the elves' light ships, which looked just like the hero's silver ship, emerged from the void docks underneath the observatory. The curry powder diffusers looked awkwardly tacked on.

Next, the multi-legged golems set out into the void, equipped with curry powder diffusers and void engines. The golem made from a World Tree branch had already been transported the previous day to its planned position on a light ship.

The World Phone spell brought us messages from the high elves of the other World Trees.

"This is Keeze of the Bulainan clan. Hero Nanashi, we pray your operation will be a success."

"This is Saaze of the Beliunan clan. We are ready to launch at any time."

"This is Tooza of the Zuwakanan clan. We are prepared as well. We await good news from the Bolenan clan."

Maybe it was just my imagination, but the Beliunan high elf sounded a little agitated to me.

Their clan seemed rather competitive with their fellow research lovers the Bulainan clan, so I was a bit worried.

"Satou, are you ready?"

Miss Aaze arrived, wearing a special void suit that looked like something straight out of a sci-fi anime.

It was a wonderful garment that clung to her body.

“Yes, if you are.”

I took Aaze’s hand, and the two of us flew into the void. Since we weren’t helping with the curry powder spraying, we drifted up to an altitude where there were no World Tree branches around.

Anyone with the “Spirit Vision” skill would see that we were surrounded by enormous spirits.

Normally, there wouldn’t be spirits in the void, but Aaze’s Space Magic and my spirit light on full blast made it possible.

I’d gathered the spirits on the ground, then Aaze used a teleport gate to bring them to the observatory in advance.

Once I confirmed on the map that everyone was in position, I gave Aaze the go signal.

“Begin diffusion!”

Aaze produced light pseudo-spirits with her Spirit Magic, which unleashed a dazzling brightness.

This was the signal for the golems and light ships to start spraying the powder.

The points of light marking the jellyfish on my map turned red for just an instant, then turned white to indicate neutrality.

“Satou, they’re sending up the signal. The jellyfish are on the move!”

Aaze grabbed my shoulders and shook me excitedly.

I could see on the map that she was right. The jellyfish were beginning to follow the diffusers.

Their role fulfilled, the multi-legged golems began to return to the observatory.

“Next, please prepare to have the sylphs guide the diffusers.”

“I’m on it! ...■■■...■ **Create Sylph Kaze Seirei Souzou.**”

Aaze cast the spell, and translucent creatures who looked like adult versions of dryads began to appear one after another.

Since the diffusers’ void engines were disposable, they were designed to float straight up like a balloon, making the sylphs’ guidance essential.

“Sylphs, please guide the devices you see below toward us. Be careful not to get caught by the jellyfish following them.”

The sylphs nodded and flew toward the powder diffusers.

I was afraid to say it out loud and jinx it, but things were going so well that it was making me nervous.

“...■■■ **Dimension Jail Mugen Rougoku.**”

Once the jellyfish had been lured together, Aaze used Space Magic to trap them in a cage.

Next, she used Dimension Pile to fix the cage in place. Since its position was set relative to the World Tree, it wouldn’t get left behind by the planet’s rotation or anything like that.

They were just far enough away from the other jellyfish that they wouldn’t set off a rampage, but since the next wave of jellyfish was coming from farther away, it was the perfect distance from the World Tree.

Here, the elves’ advanced attack magic should be able to finish them all off in one blast.

“It worked!”

“Yes, now we just need to repeat the process.”

Aaze’s happiness almost elicited a smile from me, but I managed to use my “Poker Face” skill to stay serious.

The first round had captured 197 jellyfish.

In order to exterminate all ten thousand jellyfish, we would have to repeat this process more than fifty times. We had a lot of work ahead of us, probably including breaks to recover MP.



“Ohhh, Satou... Please be gentle...”

Aaze’s sensual voice threatened to rob me of my senses, but I forced myself to keep it together as I used the Practical Magic spell Mana Drain to assist with her MP recovery.

It was all I could do not to lose myself in the high of the experience.

Silently counting prime numbers in my mind, I managed to fulfill my role as a supply ship.

This was the seventh time we’d stopped to recover magic in the observatory.

Sadly, this moment of bliss was interrupted when Lua appeared.

“Mr. Satou, please refrain from toying with Lady Aaze.”

“My apologies, Miss Lua.”

Lua seemed relatively angry, so I decided to stop messing around with the strength of my power supply to Aaze, at least for the time being.

“How are the golem team’s preparations going?”

“They just finished. Something was causing a problem with a few of the golems’ movements, but they were able to fix them by replacing the leg units in question. The operation can proceed on schedule.”

This little round of maintenance had been my suggestion.

It cost a bit of extra production time, but as a result, the parts could be replaced smoothly even without an experienced technician around.

Just as I was standing up to get back to work, Goya came running over to us. I hadn’t seen his face in a while.

“I’ll help!”

“You can’t. It’s too dangerous.” Miss Aaze frowned and shook her head.

“I’ll help!”

“Couldn’t we let him help a little?”

Goya was unfazed, so I decided to throw him a bone.

“Satou?”

“Of course, since he hasn’t been trained on the procedures, we can’t put him on the front lines. But he should be able to help Miss Lua and the others with logistical support.”

Goya looked surprised, so I explained my thinking.

“Fight!”

“Sorry, but you aren’t trained enough.”

It would be too dangerous to bring someone who was only level 13 out into the void.

He looked a little frustrated, but I couldn’t put the other elves in danger just to win his favor.

“Besides, the front lines can’t do this alone, you know. Without the help of the support teams, they wouldn’t get anywhere, right?”

“Mrrr.”

I was sure a young gun like him would’ve preferred a job that earned him more attention, but I wasn’t going to let him turn up his nose at the jobs behind the scenes.

Even companies like the one I worked at couldn’t just have a development department. It was departments like sales, accounting, and general affairs that made the business world go round.

“...Okay.”

Goya hesitated at first, but at last he nodded and accepted my proposal. He might have been a little reckless, but he wasn’t completely stupid.

“Well then, Goya, follow me. We need more communication officers to help sort things out.”

Miss Lua pulled Goya along by the arm, and they disappeared behind the piled-up materials in the observatory.

With that, we could get back to work, too.

“Shall we?”

“Of course, Satou.”

I offered Aaze a hand to help her up, checking the distribution of the rest of the jellyfish on my map.

There were only about 30 percent of them left. Another fourteen or fifteen rounds of guidance should do it.

This was the part of the process where mistakes or accidents tended to happen most, so I had Aaze and Lua warn the elves to metaphorically tighten their helmets.

“You can do it, sylphs!”

When Aaze called out to them, the sylphs shot off to guide the diffuser devices.

“My, this is going well,” she remarked, leaning against my back.

As I savored that pleasant sensation, a glint of red suddenly caught my eye.

...Hmm?

“What’s this? We’ve got a call through World Phone...”

Absentmindedly ignoring Aaze’s statement, I opened my map with a feeling of dread.

The dots that marked the jellyfish were flickering red and white. When I expanded the view, it looked like a wave of red was flowing through them.

Uh-oh. This can’t be good.

“Everyone! Emergency evacuation now!”

After I contacted Lua back at headquarters with Telephone, I unleashed three red Fireworks spells to indicate a halt on the operation.

The branches of the World Tree crackled with electricity.

I didn’t know what had gone wrong, but first we had to evacuate everyone.

The golems had shock resistance, so they should be able to stand up to the World Tree’s electrical shock, at least for a while.

“Satou! The Beliunan clan failed! They were carrying out the operation at the

same time as us!”

They what?!

Didn't they hear us say that the Bolenan clan was going to act alone first in case of any unexpected issues, since all the jellyfish seemed to be linked?

Well, there would be time to pitch a fit later.

Reining in my frustrated thoughts, I pulled away from the safety of Aaze's side to become a decoy.

“Satou!”

Once I left her wind barrier, my voice couldn't reach her, so we connected with the Telephone spell.

“Miss Aaze, retreat to one of the light ships! I'll distract the jellyfish and the World Tree.”

“Don't be ridiculous! Everyone will be fine as long as we don't make sudden moves!”

I didn't want to worry Aaze, but it was better than letting anyone get injured or worse.

“Hey, you useless weed! Are these branches or roots? Pick one already!”

I steeled myself and used the “Taunt” skill to attract the attention of the World Tree.

Without any air, the sound of my voice shouldn't have been able to travel, but it seemed like the idea got through to the tree anyway.

A huge bolt of lightning shot up toward me from the World Tree below.

“Watch out!”

On my radar, the distance between Aaze and me shrank rapidly.

No! Is she trying to protect me?!

Unlike last time, the electric shock had only just fired off.

At this rate, Aaze would get hit by the blast.

As my sheer panic seemed to slow down time, I reached out a Magic Hand to

the lightning bolt.

Since it didn't have a physical form, the hand was able to catch the lightning bolt without being shocked.

In the next moment...

"Satou, am I dreaming...? The World Tree's lightning disappeared..."

Miss Aaze's voice sounded astonished through the Telephone spell.

Thank goodness. I made it in time.

Now the gigawatt-class electric shock was sitting safely in Storage.

Since it could preserve oxygen molecules perfectly, there was no reason Storage couldn't hold the electrons and charged ions that made up the bolt as well.

I'd failed to store flame once before, but that was a different case because I didn't understand the nature of the flame well enough.

"I have all kinds of anti-shock measures, so don't worry about me. Just meet up with the light ships and help them retrieve all the elves. I'll come back once I've served as a decoy and destroyed the jellyfish."

The wind barrier wrapped around me, and Aaze's voice and warmth reached me from behind.

"You can't do this alone! Let me—"

I took Aaze's hands and gazed into her earnestly worried eyes.

A light ship arrived from the interval between dimensions to pick her up.

"Don't worry. I'll come back safely."

"...You promise?"

"Yes, I promise."

I exchanged a pinkie promise with Aaze, just as I once did with Mia in the collapsing Cradle.

Since she still looked worried, I leaned in and kissed her through our void suits.

The gentle clink of our helmets bumping together was a little bit tragic.

“S-Satou...”

“Please just wait for me. Trust me.”

Aaze’s eyes were wide and her face red as I pushed her toward the light ship, propelling myself back into the void.

Now then, time to be a hero.



In total, seventy-six of the ten thousand jellyfish had turned red. The number seemed to be increasing, but it was still a pretty tiny percentage.

Besides, over 70 percent of the jellyfish were already trapped in Aaze’s Dimension Jails. There were only 2,765 jellyfish that could still move freely.

A few dozen of them were trying to attack the multi-legged golems and their riders, so I used Remote Stun to knock them out from a distance.

Among the loose jellyfish, I could only shoot 933 of them.

Since most of the jellyfish were clinging tightly to the tree with their tentacles, I couldn’t use Remote Stun to knock them off the branches.

That was why I’d planned this roundabout Operation Curry in the first place...

But that was only because I was trying to make a plan in which the elves could dispose of the jellyfish entirely on their own.

The elves lived far longer than I would, so if they were to encounter a similar situation in the distant future, they might not have an irregularity like me to help them deal with it. I wanted to make sure they’d be all right.

But maybe that was a little too overcautious of me.

“Well then, guess I’ll get started...”

I took out a void golem from the large Fairy Pack.

It was a simple golem that could carry out actions like jet propulsion and biaxial rotation as directed by my Signal spell.

As a result, it was sturdy and had a low production cost. This time, I’d covered

most of it with rubber for extra protection.

“There you go.”

In order to give the golem some initial acceleration through the void, I threw it by hand with the help of a “Skylaunching” foothold. This was faster than its regular acceleration system.

As I repeated this process, more of the golems disappeared into the void, the reflective pane on their backs glittering by a few flashes of the World Tree’s lightning.

I stored these lightning bolts in Storage, too.

It’d be nice if it would learn soon that its electric attacks wouldn’t work, though maybe that was too much to expect of a tree.

I activated the Light Magic spell Condense several times from the magic menu.

Next, I prepared the Laser spell, using the 3-D map display to figure out its trajectory.

This was a similar combo to the one I’d used to defeat the seven giant monster fish Tobkezerra when they appeared in the sky above the old capital.

However, I wasn’t going to be firing a focused Laser this time.

Even an ordinary laser could cause the World Tree’s branches to break just by passing near them, so a focused one was out of the question.

Putting that thought aside, I turned to the map again.

Two circles appeared around one of the dots, indicating a jellyfish on my map.

Beside the circles were the words **Locked On**. More of these indicators appeared one after another until nearly half the jellyfish on my map had been marked.

However, the majority of them were sheltered behind branches.

> Reflector One, placement completed.

> Reflector Four, placement completed.

> Reflector Twelve, placement completed.

The Signal spell from the void golems informed me that they'd arrived at their positions.

As each golem reached its place, target marks appeared on more and more of the jellyfish on my map that hadn't been locked on before.

Just to be safe, I checked that there weren't any elves nearby who might get hurt.

"All right. Checkmate."

In my mind, I pulled the trigger.

A flood of light filled the empty void.

The hundred Lasers I'd fired were scattered by the Condense spell, increasing their number.

All of them were doubled over and over until eventually 3,200 bright lines were bouncing around the void.

That was a little more than necessary, but it shouldn't be a problem.

Tiny glimmers danced across the branches of the World Tree.

It was the Lasers piercing the jellyfish, bouncing off their transparent remains and creating a diffused reflection.

However, the jellyfish I couldn't directly target were still intact.

At this rate, they would go into rampage mode and multiply—but I already had a countermeasure for that.

Some of the thin little Lasers reached certain points and bounced at an angle.

Reflected off the void golems, they changed direction a few times until they hit the jellyfish hidden behind the World Tree's branches.

That's right: I was imitating the anime technique Arisa had used back at the mountain stream.

I hadn't managed to find a material that could reflect my focused Lasers, but if I used Condense to scatter them into weaker Lasers, most reflective surfaces

would work.

Thus, the stubborn red lights above the World Tree disappeared as if they'd been wiped away with a cloth.

"Satou! The cages!"

Aaze cried out from the light ship.

Looking up and over my shoulder, I saw that the jellyfish were on the verge of breaking out of the Dimension Jails.

Their eyes were burning red, having watched so many of their fellows be destroyed.

There were several times more of them than the number I'd just destroyed.

"Run, Satou!"

Aaze's desperate voice pained my heart.

It's all right.

I already declared checkmate, remember?

A merciless flower began to bloom in the void...

Explosion.

The most powerful attack spell of all the intermediate Explosion Magic spells.

The vibrations shook the aether in the otherwise soundless space.

Since we were out here in the void, I didn't have to hold back out of fear of destroying the surrounding environment.

A few jellyfish survived, but I burned them away with another round of Lasers.

"Well, that wraps up this operation."

With a sigh, I used Magic Hand to start cleaning up the jellyfish debris.

Then my "Sense Danger" skill reacted to something.

A terrible premonition ran through the back of my mind as I cleaned.

It was coming from the World Tree.

"Wh-what's this?"

The trunk beneath the observatory had been ripped open by a huge jellyfish tentacle bursting forth.

“One of them got into the World Tree?!”

The tentacle reached toward the observatory.

Crap!

There were a lot of elves in the observatory who weren’t wearing void suits.

I definitely couldn’t fire Laser, never mind Explosion.

Besides, I was too far away. No ordinary magic would reach.

I used “Warp” and “Skylrunning” to move as fast as I could, but I would never make it in time.

The thick tentacle smashed the dome of the observatory, and several elves were sucked into the void along with the crushed mucous wall.

I recognized those faces—it was Mia’s parents and Goya.

I jumped forward with enough force to shatter the “Skylrunning” foothold.

HURRYYYYYYYYYY!

My heart burned so fiercely that I could almost feel time slowing down.

It was a similar feeling to when I’d tried to save Sara from becoming a sacrifice for the demon lord.

Right. That time...

> Skill Acquired: “Flashrunning”

Just as I felt a sensation in my mind like a puzzle piece falling into place, I arrived directly in front of the tentacle.

The instant I realized it was about to strike the dome again, I pulled back as hard as I could to unleash a powerful punch against the building-size tentacle.

Then, as the broken tentacle plummeted toward the trunk of the World Tree, I quickly used Magic Hand to return Mia’s parents and Goya to the observatory.

“You’ve got some nerve, avoiding my map search,” I muttered at the jellyfish tentacle as I activated my new “Flashrunning” skill.

It seemed to be an advanced combination of “Skyrunning” and “Warp.”

More jellyfish tentacles emerged from other parts of the tree.

How in the world did my map search miss them?

A series of images flashed across my mind...

The broken eggs and the mismatched amount of larvae.

The mysteriously polluted sap.

Removing the clogged sap near the jellyfish made them react the same way as if you’d destroyed an egg.

I already had the answer.

As the images fell into place, I turned them into words.

The jellyfish that had hatched from the eggs hid in the sap, going through a pupa state in the guise of crystallized, polluted sap, and then transformed into actual jellyfish.

And since we’d removed all the jellyfish at once, the ones that were hiding inside the World Tree as polluted sap all grew at once and merged to form a giant one.

I could even see that the sap flowing through the trunk was turning into small jellyfish.

Now that I understood the situation, it was time to get rid of the infection.

I had no mercy for pests.

Evading the lightning of the World Tree and the tentacle attacks of the jellyfish, I put Spellblade on the ends of my fingertips and beyond, using it to slash up the jellyfish and put them away in Storage.

Sap from the World Tree began to leak from the huge hole that had been opened in its trunk.

I temporarily put the leaking sap away in Storage and used Liquid Control to stop the leakage.

Finally, I entered the World Tree through the hole and used the intermediate

Water Magic spell Healing: Water to close it up.

Now I was trapped inside, but that worked out just fine for me: I could follow the flow of the sap through the tubes and destroy the rogue jellyfish from the inside.

While I did this, I also collected the polluted sap that hadn't transformed yet into Storage along with the corpses.

I picked up the sap immediately surrounding the contaminated areas, too, just to be safe.

Infectious diseases like this one tend to hide in strange places, after all.



"Satou's signal is gone..."

Aaze was lying on the floor of the observatory, despondent.

"Well, that's a shame," I responded wryly as I approached.

"Lua! How can you be so cruel?! Satou saved the World Tree, you know! Why would you say a thing like that?!"

Mistaking my reply for Lua's, Aaze cried out in a rare moment of anger.

Even angry, she was as beautiful as ever.

I stepped in front of Aaze to show her that I was safe. I'd already put my void suit away in Storage, of course. No need to be wearing unnecessary equipment during our emotional reunion.

"I'm back, Miss Aaze."

Her blankly confused expression was pretty good, too.

Since I'd been deep inside the trunk of the World Tree, returning the normal way would have been a pain, so I just used Return to teleport back.

That must have cut off Aaze's tracking signal, worrying her.

I'd felt like I was being watched for a while, so she must have been watching me with Clairvoyance, too.

"You're back..."

Aaze stared at me in a daze.

“You’re back.”

Why did she say that twice?

“Welcome back, Satou.”

Aaze wrapped her arms around my neck, so I returned the embrace. If Arisa or Mia had been there, they’d probably be saying “Guilty” right about then.

“Thanks, Miss Aaze.”

I lovingly stroked the high elf’s hair as she sobbed with relief.

Confession

Satou here. I've always been strangely popular with younger girls, but I've never successfully confessed to an older woman. The girlfriend I had for a while was around my same age. Am I fated to be unappealing to older women or what?

"I'm back..."

"Welcome home. Are you hurt? Take your coat off and lie down."

Obediently, I handed Arisa my robe and threw myself onto the living room sofa.

After my emotional reunion with Miss Aaze, I'd used "Flashrunning" to zip around the entire planet and help the other clans with their jellyfish extermination.

Despite defeating a grand total of over seventy thousand jellyfish, my level hadn't gone up from 310.

My EXP gauge did squeak up a little, but after all that, it was no more than 5 percent higher than before.

As far as I could tell, the cryptid category the jellyfish belonged to was worth less EXP than the monster category, so two thousand of them yielded about the same amount of experience as a single giant monster fish.

The jellyfish didn't even have cores.

All of the clans' high elves had summoned massively powerful pseudo-spirits to do battle with the jellyfish.

They probably could have handled things without me, albeit with more damage to the World Trees and possible injuries to the elves.

Images of the pseudo-spirits like the Beliunan clan's golden Garuda and the Biloanan clan's fiery Ifrit floated through my mind as I drifted off to sleep.

Something about traveling around the entire world on foot really took it out of a person.

“Are you all ready?”

“Yes. This is a bit embarrassing, though.”

At the shrine maiden Lua’s behest, I was aboard a palanquin for a parade.

It had been five days since the extermination of the jellies, and I was the guest of honor at the elves’ festival to celebrate our success.

I’d initially refused the parade, but I gave in to Aaze’s pleading request.

“Heeerooo, we’re liiifting the paaalanquiiin.”

“Sure, thanks.”

The palanquin was being carried by trolls, who were around the size of small giants with bluish-black skin. They had a bit of a drawl, though not as much as the forest giants.

“So cool!”

“You look very amazing, sir!”

“Yes, that is quite a handsome look, master.”

“Master, you look wonderful, I commend. Requesting matching armor.”

I waved at the beastfolk girls and Nana as they gazed at me with sparkling eyes.

For the parade, I was wearing blue Holy Armor, said to have been left behind by the hero Daisaku.

Without the Hero title, it was just heavy. Once I switched to the right title, though, it moved automatically to match my movements, making it feel so light that it was like I was wearing nothing at all.

“I dunno. I think a white robe suits him more than armor.”

“Do you? What about his adorable apron look, though?”

I rolled my eyes and ignored Arisa and Lulu’s slightly off-topic discussion, then looked around at the other people who were assembling in the plaza.

Just about every elf in the Bolenan Forest was here today—aside from the ones asleep in sleep tanks, of course.

On top of that, there was the usual array of brownies and winged fairies, plus spriggans, leprechauns, silky, trolls, and all kinds of other fairies. The chieftains of a few beastfolk villages hidden along the border of the Bolenan Forest were also present. To celebrate the festival, everyone was dressed to the nines.

Many of the winged fairies were drifting around above the parade, tossing flower petals down on my head.

“Satou!”

Turning around, I saw Goya standing next to the palanquin.

“Thanks!”

I guess he wanted to thank me for saving his life out in the void.

“Approval!”

Of what?

I tilted my head, and Goya gave me one of his classic *Are you an idiot?* looks.

How am I supposed to understand if you only use one or two words at a time?

“Mia. Engagement. Consent!” Goya shouted.

No, no. We’re not actually engaged; that’s just Mia’s little joke... I wanted to explain this misunderstanding, but he had already disappeared into the crowd. I’d have to resolve this later.

Finally, I saw Aaze standing on a stage in the center of the plaza.

Instead of her usual shrine maiden garb, she was wearing a fancy dress with a high collar that made her look like the queen of the fairies.

Her composed expression was beautiful, too. Maybe she would take a photo with me later.

“Children of Bolenan, please listen. Though I kept it a secret from you all, I can now tell you that our mother the World Tree was under attack by creatures known as Evil Jellies. But as of yesterday, we have finished exterminating them.”

Aaze spoke in a clear voice as she explained the situation to the elves in the plaza. It sounded like she might have scripted this speech.

“...And the human who saved the World Tree is none other than Nanashi the Hero! Please give him a round of applause!”

I was so busy admiring Aaze that I almost missed my introduction. A little belatedly, I waved at the crowd as they clapped.

Once the applause died down, seven pillars of light appeared on the platform.

“Wh-what?!”

Judging by Aaze’s shocked reaction, this wasn’t part of the plan.

Eventually, the pillars of light resolved into the forms of the high elves from the other clans, the ones we’d spoken with during the Holytree Council meetings.

They appeared to be in the flesh this time, not just projections.

“The Holytrees left their own World Trees...?” My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up a murmur of disbelief from Lua. This seemed to be a rare occasion even for the long-lived elves.

The chatter in the plaza fell silent, and most of the other races besides the elves dropped to their knees. While the elves didn’t prostrate themselves in the same way, they did sit in careful postures.

“Apologies, Aaze. It was rude of us to visit without informing you first.”

Miss Luze of the Baleonan clan seemed to be representing the high elves today.

There had been male high elves in the council meetings, but today it was all women.

“B-but why?” Aaze asked.

“Nanashi the Hero saved all eight World Trees, not just Bolenan’s. Thus, we felt that all of us should present our thanks.”

“It pains us to break tradition, but we left the others to mind the World Trees and hurried straight here,” another high elf explained.

“Hero Nanashi, we of the Biloanan clan acknowledge you as a friend and ally. You are welcome to visit us at any time. We look forward to comparing your flame techniques with those of our clan.”

The redheaded high elf who otherwise looked just like Aaze shook my hand with an eager grin.

“Hero Nanashi, we of the Bulainan clan also acknowledge you as a friend. We admire your intellect over your strength, and we await your visitation so that we might research together.”

A high elf with unusual emerald hair smiled wisely and laid her slender hand atop mine.

The other high elves gave similar words of thanks and placed their hands on the pile.

Then, last but not least...

“Hero Nanashi! We of the Beliunan clan thank you for resolving our errors! We vow to work together with all the clans to fulfill any request you may have at any time. Ask of us anything you wish.”

The aqua-haired high elf from the Beliunan clan seemed to have water droplets in her hair as she wrapped both her hands around mine, tears in her eyes.

““““We acknowledge Nanashi the Hero as the ninth Holytree.””””

—*Wait, what?*

““““Please grant him a blessing.””””

The other high elves except Aaze all spoke in unison, then each of them placed a kiss of blessing on the forehead of my mask.

Kind of embarrassing, to be honest.

>Title Acquired: Sage

>Title Acquired: Holytree

>Title Acquired: Savior of the Elves

>Title Acquired: Friend of the High Elves

>Title Acquired: Savior of the High Elves

Huh? I thought Holytree was a sort of nickname or role for the high elves, not a title.

“““Ahhhhhh!””” Aaze shrieked, as did a few other voices, like Arisa and Lulu, from elsewhere in the plaza.

For some reason, Aaze even had tears in her eyes.

“...Th-the Ladies Holytree gave him a kiss of the covenant?” There was a murmur from some of the elves in the crowd.

I’d been told early on that a kiss on the forehead was some kind of sacred act, so maybe the high elves doing it to a human was particularly shocking.

“What’s wrong, Aaze? Will you not grant him one as well?” The high elf from Biloanan raised an eyebrow.

“W-wehhh... I... I can’t...” Aaze turned bright red and shook her head rapidly.

Darn. I would’ve liked a kiss from her, too, to be honest.

“Hero Nanashi, this is a gift of our thanks. Please accept it.”

The high elves used the Space Magic spell Garage to produce some large blue crystals.

According to the AR, each of them contained about a ton of Holytree Stone.

“You are free to use these however you wish. We look forward to your decision.”

They probably wanted me to use them to take care of the Bolenan clan’s shortage of Holytree Stones, then. Maybe there was some special reason they couldn’t just do it directly.

“Farewell, Hero Nanashi.”

“Let’s meet again sometime!”

With that, the high elves disappeared into the same pillars of light from whence they’d come.

I guess I never told them my “real” name was Satou.

If I ever went to visit their Holy Trees, maybe I would show them my real face and tell them my name.

Turning around, I saw that Aaze was glancing at me out of the corner of her eye.

“Miss Aaze, you can use these to restore the light ships to their original number.”

“Hmm? But those are for you, remember?”

I thought she’d been looking at me because she couldn’t admit that she wanted the Holytree crystal wood, but I guess I was wrong.

“I could never use all of this by myself. I’d be happy if you use them to rebuild the light ships and any left over to restore the World Tree.”

I already had plenty of bluecoins, so I didn’t have much use for Holytree Stone anyway.

“You were kind enough to freely share so much of the Bolenan clan’s wisdom with me. Please allow me to give you this small repayment.”

“Satou...” Aaze trailed off and gave me a grateful hug.

In the distance, I could hear a declaration of “Guilty” from Arisa and Mia.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of the elder elves give a signal to the band, starting the festivities off in Aaze’s place.

“When did you seduce all those other high elves, darn it?”

“Cheater.”

Arisa and Mia grabbed my arms accusingly.

Lulu, who was running a crepe stand for the festival, looked a little displeased as well.

Meanwhile, Nana was helping Lulu, and the beastfolk girls were hard at work at their grilled meat skewer stand, befriending the people of Bolenan with their usual charm.

The people of the forest didn’t seem to discriminate against races or even Arisa’s lilac hair or Lulu’s Japanese features. It might not be bad to settle here

after my sightseeing trip was over.

“Is something wrong, Miss Aaze?”

Aaze had been glancing at me for a while now. She was acting so much like a teen girl who wanted her *senpai* to notice her that I couldn't help my rising hopes.

That was probably just my ego getting the best of me, but I thought most guys would feel the same way.

“S-Satou, come with me.” Aaze grabbed my hand and stood up, looking frazzled.

“Certainly, if that's what you wish.”

I nodded and stood up with her, but then I felt a tug at my sleeve.

Looking down, I found Arisa and Mia hanging on to me. *Don't go!* was written all over their faces.

“I'll be back soon,” I assured them with a smile, pulling my arm away.

Then I took Aaze's hand, and she teleported us to the World Tree.

“This, uh, isn't what I think it is, is it...?”

We'd arrived in Aaze's room inside the World Tree.

I was listening to the sound of water through the door.

Aaze was taking a shower in the bathroom.

Just to be safe, I used the Everyday Magic spells Soft Wash and Dry to clean myself off, too.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Would you like to take a shower, too?”

The sound of water ceased, and Aaze reappeared in a bathrobe.

“Erm, that's all right, thank you. I used Everyday Magic already.”

“...I see. All right, then.”

Intentionally or not, Aaze struck me as coquettish as she took my hand and led me into a dark room.

“Wh-what is this place?”

Pale lights flickered in the room, which was not quite what I’d expected.

“This is the high elves’ memory archive. You’re the first human ever to see it, Satou.”

I was honored, if perhaps a little disappointed for other reasons.

I suppose I only had myself to blame for having impure expectations.

“...■ **Connect Memory** *Kiokuko Setsuzoku*.”

Aaze removed the bathrobe and spoke a password, and blue light enveloped her body.

When the dance of the mystical light settled, she slowly opened her eyes.

They looked deep and clear, like the elder elves before.

“Satou, I’m sorry if my normal self gave you the wrong impression.”

Her “normal self”?

Did she have multiple personalities like an old literary character or something?

Was she giving up her old self to become a new one or that kind of thing?

“Do you have a different personality from the Miss Aaze I know?”

“No, I’m still me. Right now, I’m connected to the archiver of the World Tree’s memory archive, but my self is always one and the same.”

She explained that her normal self retained detailed memories of only the past few hundred years, with just a vague index of her older experiences.

Still, she sounded a little different than usual to me.

“We change along with time, you see. When I am connected to all my old memories, I cannot help but become quieter and more introspective.”

In this state, I could actually believe that Aaze was a demi-goddess. I decided to refer to this version of her as Goddess Aaze.

“Fair enough.” Goddess Aaze smiled.

“Wait, can you read my mind now, too?”

“Just a little, yes. While in this room, the surfaces of our consciousnesses connect, so I can more or less follow any clear statements that you form in your mind.”

I see. I'd better not think anything perverted, then.

“That would be appreciated, yes. I have lived a long time indeed, but I am as yet an unmarried maiden.”

The normal Aaze would never make that kind of joke.

It was as if there really were two of her.

“So may I ask why you have brought me here?”

Surely it wasn't just because I'd given them a lot of Holytree Stones.

Goddess Aaze drew up her nude body, straightening her posture.

“Indeed. There is something I wish to ask you.” She paused for a moment, then looked into my eyes. “Satou, who exactly are you?”

Her question was so abrupt that I wasn't sure how to answer.

“Many heroes are unusual, but you are on a different level entirely. Why, I believe you are far stronger even than the great demon lord who revolted against the gods for some twenty thousand years, the one known as the ‘evil god’...”

My easy extermination of the jellyfish attacking the World Trees must have aroused her suspicions.

I didn't want to scare her even further, so I decided not to mention that I hadn't really been using my full power there.

“...If you were a god yourself, perhaps it would make sense. But you are not a god, are you?”

I shook my head and asked why she would think that.

“Gods and their disciples cannot be Analyzed. Only demi-gods, like the dragon god or us high elves who have endless lives but are of the earth, or those with fixed life spans like fairies and humans.”

Hmm. I'd better be careful if I ever ran into someone I couldn't Analyze, then.

I hadn't been sure whether the elves had a fixed life span until now.

"But your power is not all that is unique about you. Your absorption of knowledge is far faster than ordinary, as well. It's as if you are relearning something you already knew; you learn one tenet and immediately seem to grasp ten. My normal self was simply excited about this, but within all my memories and even the database of the other high elves', there has never been another like you."

That was probably because my INT was insanely high; plus I had knowledge from my old world.

"Of course, I am well aware that you mean no harm toward the children of Bolenan or me. But as the Holytree who protects Bolenan, I have no choice but to ask you: Who are you really?"

Hmm. I guess I'd better answer honestly.

"It's a bit of a long story. I come from another world, from the same place as the heroes..."

I went on to explain everything.

Even things I hadn't told Arisa and the others, like how I'd brought down the dragon god.

Part of it was because I thought that with her millions of years' worth of knowledge, she might know why I had been brought to this world; more than that, though, I was afraid to keep it a secret while we were connected like this and incur her distrust or dislike.

"...The dragon god?"

"I'm afraid so. Though this may be a poor excuse, I didn't know the power of the Meteor Shower at the time, nor that the dragon god was within range along with the army of lizardfolk."

"You have nothing to be ashamed of. Dragons revere those who can pose a challenge to them, even more so those who are strong enough to defeat them. I'm sure the dragon god would praise you for your victory, not resent you."

I remembered the black dragon Hei Long and his obsession with battle.

Maybe all dragons had a similar thought process to his.

“Besides, the dragon god is indestructible. Within a hundred years, it will surely be revived, body and all. Then it will most likely be able to revive the other dragons with the same power.”

I guess they didn’t call the dragon god the strongest for nothing. Even its miracles were on another level.

“Though the dragon god hates to lose, so I expect you will find yourself challenged to a rematch.”

Geh, really? I’m pretty sure I only won because it wasn’t expecting that attack...

“Well, I hope that happens before my life span runs out.”

I used my “Poker Face” skill to try to impress Goddess Aaze with my bluff, even though I knew it was impossible.

She smiled in response, kindly accepting my statement at face value.

“I do not know why you were brought to this world. However, since you have Unique Skills, I believe it is likely that you are under the divine protection of a god. We have no way of discerning which one, but I’m sure they will contact you themselves eventually.”

For some reason, those words evoked a flashback in my mind.

Maybe the image of that girl with the multicolored hair was a message from the god who had brought me to this parallel world.

The mood had gotten a bit heavy, so I tried to lighten it by telling the story of my travels, from meeting my friends to battling the whales, in as entertaining a way as I could.

“Sightseeing, you say...? That sounds quite fun.”

“Would you like to come with me? You’d be more than welcome to join us, Miss Aaze.”

Goddess Aaze’s voice held notes of longing and loneliness, so I made the offer

before I could stop myself.

Since we were connected here, she was probably already well aware of my growing romantic and physical feelings for her.

“I’m sorry, Satou.”

Her words of rejection pierced my heart more deeply than I’d expected. “N-no, there’s no need to apologize.”

I managed to keep up appearances, but the tumultuous emotions churning in my heart threatened to spill out of my mouth all at once.

“Satou, I am the final Holytree of Bolenan. It is my duty to protect the World Tree and the children of Bolenan. Thus, I cannot return your feelings.”

Goddess Aaze held my head against her chest.

I wanted to wrap my arms around her slim body, but I managed to keep myself under control with logic and restraint.

“Besides, we high elves are the brides of ‘the god who could not wed.’ For a being with a fixed life span to lay a hand on any of us would be to invite the wrath of that god. And so, this is all I can do...”

Goddess Aaze laid a gentle kiss on my forehead and slowly released me from her embrace.

“...Satou, I will keep this and the secrets you told me locked away in my personal memory archive. The other high elves will be unable to see them, and my normal self will not have access to them, so worry not,” she promised.

The kiss would be kept a secret from the normal Aaze, too, it seemed.

“If we don’t cut the connection to the memory archive soon, it will have a negative effect on your body... So let us meet again. Or is that strange to say? At any rate, please treat my normal self as you usually would.”

With that, the mystic light surrounding Goddess Aaze disappeared.

Once the connection was severed, the regular Aaze got embarrassed that I had seen her naked and avoided me for a while. Just as Goddess Aaze had promised, she didn’t seem to remember our conversation.

Thus, my confession of love was over before it could even begin. But the more obstacles it faced, the stronger love would grow.

If I could find a way to wake the other high elves safely, and if I could do something about the so-called wrath of some god or other, I decided I would confess to her again, properly this time.

Until then, I would just have to settle for trying to be something more than friends but less than lovers.



It had been a month since the festival.

Our days in the Bolenan Forest were almost at an end.

If I were to describe each one, you could probably fill a whole novel with it.



“Satou, the observational satellite golem Kakashi MK 7 is working wonderfully. I’d like to improve the precision of its telescopic lens a little more, but first...”

“Enough already, Keze of the Bulainan clan! The plans for the jellyfish investigation deep space golem are complete. We shall send along our blueprints for peer review at once.”

“Honestly, Saaze of the Beliunan clan. Can’t you wait your turn?”

We were developing units for detecting jellyfish as early as possible and for investigating the cause of the jellyfish outbreak.

I had intended to help them out until the units were complete, but since they’d come so far already, they should be fine without me from here on in.

So as the two high elves taunted each other in friendly competition, I looked over the plans they’d sent.

“Ah, Mr. Satou, the light ship rebuilding is going smoothly as well. Bolenan’s light ships should be restored to their usual number within half a year.” Jia the gardener happened to be passing by. “Oh, and could you stop by later, please? Kiya said he had a question about the coaxial skypower engine you made.”

“All right. I’m supposed to learn how to make divine gold at the transmutation workshop today, so I’ll come by after that.”

“Good idea. Kiya can go on for a while.”

She wasn’t wrong, but I owed a lot to Kiya from the magic-tool studio, since he’d helped me remodel the magic ship I planned to use to get to Labyrinth City.

“Master, preparations are complete, I report.”

“All right. Calm down a little, please.”

Standing in front of the cultivation tanks in the underground research lab, Nana flung her clothes off eagerly, so I politely handed her a towel.

Despite her lack of expression, her excitement was palpable. She must have really been looking forward to this.

“Master Satou, the tank has been fully supplied with liquid.”

“Thank you, Gillil. Ready to go, Nana?”

“Yes, master! The new me will be of even more use, I pledge!”

Nana was raring to go, so I used Magic Hand to lift her and gently lower her into the light-green liquid in the tank.

It was the kind of liquid you often saw in sci-fi, which supplied oxygen directly to the lungs.

I had tested it out myself once and found that while it was a little rough going in and out, actually being inside the liquid was fine.

“Gillil, the partitioning screen, please.”

Nana was completely exposed as she floated in the tank, so I had Gillil set up a screen to hide her naked body.

I’d already calibrated the device the day before, so I was able to install the new Foundation functions for Nana right away.

Within a few days, the upgrade process would be complete, and she could show off her new abilities to everyone at our elf teachers’ training ground.

As I imagined that future, I kept an eye on Nana’s vitals displayed on the cultivation tank’s monitor.

I’d made sure the settings were perfect, but I wouldn’t want to let anything happen to Nana, just in case.

“...Planting seeds, you say?”

“Yes, it’s a request from the treants.”

The day after Nana’s upgrades were completed, Aaze came to visit the tree house.

She handed me the golden fruits of the treants.

“I’d like you to plant them in places with lots of water and not too much miasma, whether it’s wetlands, an island, or wherever it may be. If possible, near a mana source would be ideal.”

If I planted the seeds near a source, she said I was welcome to keep the fruits themselves. The fruits were said to be delicious, as well as useful for making advanced potions.

“I’d be happy to, if you’re willing to entrust this to me.”

“Thank you, Satou.”

Smiling, Aaze opened her Space Magic Garage spell and produced nearly a thousand of the fruits.

“You can plant five to ten of them in the same area.”

In other words, I was supposed to find at least a hundred different sources.

“All right. I’ll do my very best.” I put a hand to my chest.

Surprisingly, there was no exclamation of “Guilty!” from Mia. Maybe she was getting sentimental, since we’d be parting soon?

Our sailing ship and the small airship were completely ready to go, so I should spend the rest of the time before our departure with Mia.

“...Going.”

“No.”

“You can’t, Mia. I forbid it. The labyrinth is dangerous. None of the children who went with Yuya and Shiya ever came back—not one! I can’t allow it; I won’t!”

When I went to visit Mia at her family’s home, I overheard this conversation from outside.

Mia seemed to want to go with us to the labyrinth, but her parents wouldn’t allow it.

Of course not... I doubted any parents would want to send their child to such a dangerous place.

“Satou.”

Mia came flying out the door and leaped into my arms.

I greeted her worried-looking parents and left to spend the day with her.

“...Wanna come.”

“Your parents would worry. Only adults are allowed to do whatever they want.”

She probably wouldn't like hearing that, since I was an adult myself, but I couldn't approve of her going against her parents' wishes. In my opinion, you had to be mentally and emotionally independent before you could make all your own decisions.

“Mm. Fine.”

To my surprise, Mia relented.

There was no conflict or bitterness in her tone. In her heart, she must have already known my answer.

For the next few days before our departure, we played from morning till night, exploring every inch of the Bolenan Forest as if it were our personal garden.

The horses and runosaurs were peevish from being cooped up for so long, so we took them out hunting in a huge field.

At one point, we went to see a herd of unicorns, and I think Mia's hornless unicorn mount fell in love with one of the females.

Eventually, our happy times in the elf village came to an end...

“The breeze feels nice out here. Is that our ship?”

“It sure is.”

Arisa held her fluttering hair in place as she looked up at the ship docked at the pier.

This was a finfolk port town at the edge of the Bolenan Forest.

We'd said good-bye to the elves in the plaza near our tree house, so it was just us, Mia's family, and Aaze and Lua.

“Something's strange, sir.”

“Weird smeeell?”

Pochi and Tama pinched their noses. They had probably never smelled the ocean before.

Arisa explained to them that it was the smell of the tide. The water around here seemed warm, so maybe I could let them swim in the ocean sometime.

Liza and Nana were carrying our luggage onto the ship, while Lulu worked on the deck.

Before long, Mia came tottering up to me.

“Good-bye for now, Mia. Be nice to your parents.”

“Mm. Satou.”

Mia brushed the hair away from her forehead, silently pressuring me to kiss her there.

Since a kiss on the forehead was supposed to be sacred and all, maybe this was meant to be a promise to reunite?

I didn't see any harm in doing it as a farewell, so I leaned down and kissed her forehead so lightly I barely even brushed her skin.

“Goodness, Mia. What an expert tactician you are.”

“Mm. Yep.”

Mia grinned and made a victory sign at her parents.

“Coming.”

Sorry, what?

“Coming!” For the first time in a while, Mia summoned up a few long sentences. “Satou of the Shiga Kingdom, I am pleased that you have accepted the ritual of betrothal. I, Misanaria Bolenan, promise to be as your wing until the day that death doth separate you from me.”

Wait a minute. Did I just get tricked?

“My, how wonderful. I'm so thrilled. Mr. Satou, please take good care of Mia, all right?”

“Protect.”

I got tricked, all right.

Mia's mother explained that a kiss on the forehead was "sacred" in more ways than one.

In particular, a kiss on the forehead between a man and a woman who were not related was a proposal when done by one party, and the agreement was sealed if the other party did the same in return.

So that was why Mia kept saying I was her fiancé.

Mia's parents were understanding when I explained that I didn't know about this particular custom, but Mia herself simply covered her ears and pretended not to hear anything.

Her pigtailed smacking against me hurt a little.

...Hang on.

If that was the case, did that mean I had proposed to Aaze when we first met?

At the time, I'd thought she was just being emotionally unstable, but now her reaction might make sense.

In that case, when Goddess Aaze kissed me on the forehead in return...

I turned to look at Aaze and found that she was puffing up her cheeks grumpily and looking the other way.

A smile threatened to take over my expression, so I used "Poker Face" to ward it off.

Before we set sail, I reconfirmed with Mia's parents that they were truly all right with her accompanying us. They explained that betrothal or no, Bolenan considered anyone who had exchanged forehead kisses an adult, so they were willing to abide by Mia's wishes.

"All right. I promise to take good care of her, then."

"Oh yes. I have complete faith in you!"

"Mm. Trust."

Mia's parents took my hands and nodded.

“Laya. Lia.” Mia called out her parents’ names and clung to them.

I stepped away to let them do their farewells in private, instead walking over to Aaze.

“I suppose this is farewell. I’ll come back to visit, all right?”

“Yes, please do. The Bolenan clan will always welcome you.”

Aaze and I shook hands.

“Mr. Satou...” Lua threw her arms around me in a parting embrace.

That was a surprise. I didn’t think we were that close.



She soon revealed her reasons. “Thank you for not taking away Lady Aaze. She is the final Holytree of Bolenan—our heart and soul...”

I was sure no one else was able to hear her tearfully whisper in my ear.

That explained why she always showed up to put a stop to it whenever Aaze and I were getting too close, then.

“Please come back anytime. We’ll keep your tree house ready for your use.”

I nodded at the tearful shrine maiden.

Our farewells could have gone on forever, but Mia had pulled away from her parents and was clinging to my waist, so I took this as a sign to board the ship.

Besides, with the elves’ permission, I’d put a Return seal slate in the tree house where we’d been staying, so I could come back anytime.

It would be hard to figure out a stopping point on this leg of our journey, but surely we would pass some islands or land masses.

We waved to the people who’d gathered to say good-bye, and I spread the ship’s sails with Magic Hand. Then, using Air Control, I created wind to carry the ship away.

““““Satou!””””

Looking back at the source of the voices, I saw that the elves we’d parted with back at the tree house had come to see us off.

Countless winged fairies called out to Nana and the other girls, drawing farewell signs out of light in the air.

...I appreciated it, but after this dramatic parting, it would make it difficult to just pop back with Return.

My party and I all waved until we couldn’t see the figures on the shore anymore.

“We’ve lost sight of them,” Arisa murmured.

“Mm. Soon.”

Mia’s eyes were red from tears.

She probably meant that we could come back to visit again soon.

“Satou.”

Mia flew into my arms, so I caught her gently as I gazed out at the horizon.

Thus, our long stay in the Bolenan Forest came to an end, and the wind in our sails began our journey to Labyrinth City.

Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you so much for picking up the eighth volume of *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*!

It's all thanks to the support of my readers that I've been able to continue this series.

I plan to work even harder to keep things interesting from this point on, so I hope you'll continue to support the books.

Now, let's start with the highlights of this volume.

The elf village in Bolenan Forest was the stage for this story. In the reimaged novel version, Satou and the others, having finally brought Mia home, get to spend a fun vacation surrounded by elves.

The first two chapters more or less followed the same flow as the web version, but after that, it's pretty much all newly written for the novel.

Though it wasn't deliberately written with the season of the release date in mind, I did want to center it around a fun summer vacation, so I included some enjoyable scenes in the public bathhouse with the elves and various races like treants and different fairies who didn't show up in the web version, plus the group's elf teachers.

I hope you enjoy this peaceful vacation with Satou and his friends.

...I'm guessing longtime fans of *Death March* already know it won't be that simple, though.

Satou's a bit of a workaholic, so the idea of a completely relaxing vacation is pretty much foreign to him.

He's in the midst of a highly advanced magical culture, after all.

So I hope you enjoy Satou's corporate-slave antics in the midst of his peaceful days with his party.

Of course, it's not all fun and research.

This time, there's just a teeny, tiny hint of romance, too.

In this volume, a heroine whose name has come up a few times finally makes an appearance. Will she win Satou over with her womanly charms? You'll just have to find out when you read the book.

Readers of the web version will find new scenes, including a different finale from that scene in the web version, so I hope you'll still get a lot of excitement out of reading it until the end. Please look forward to it.

Finally, the usual round of thank-yous.

My editors Mr. H and Mr. K have given me all kinds of helpful advice and instructions to make many scenes more charming and emotional. I hope you'll continue to guide me in the future.

As always, I can never thank shri enough for always drawing such wonderful illustrations that give so much life to *Death March*. Aialize's design was particularly perfect.

The visual side of *Death March* is in your capable hands.

Finally, thank you to the Kadokawa Books editorial department and everyone else involved in the publication, printing, and sale of this book.

And though you know what I'm going to say by now, the biggest thanks of all goes to you, the readers!!

Thank you for reading this volume all the way to the end.

Let's meet again in the next volume for an adventure at sea!

It might even wind up being completely new material next time.

Hiro Ainana

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